TAPPEI
NAGATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION BY
SHINICHIROU
OTSUKA
24
Re:ZeRo
-Starting Life in Another World-

Re:ZeRo
-Starting Life in Another World-

—Elsa Gramhilde was an outrageous woman.
"I was told to bring you back, so you'll be coming with me."
Their first meeting was awful.

"This is the lonely, white end of the line for souls.
The cradle, Odo Ragna. The corridors of memory."
"Corridors of...memory...?"
"Yep, yep. And..."
The girl who was a walking bundle of malice spoke with a sneer.
"...And we are Louis Arneb, Archbishop of Gluttony."
"..."
"It will just be for a short while again, but it's nice to meet you, mister."

"Shaula, I'm asking again. What is the tower's fifth rule?"
"Nuh-uh."
She shook her head and crossed her arms in an X in front of her impressive bust.
"Don't wanna. No. I won't say it. The fifth rule? Who cares about that? It has nothing to do with our honeymoon..."

Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-

The only ability Subaru Natsuki gets when he's summoned to another world is time travel via his own death. But to save her, he'll die as many times as it takes.

CONTENTS

Chapter 1
Waiting for the Ice to Thaw

Chapter 2
In the Future

Chapter 3
—Stand Up

Chapter 4
Five Obstacles

Chapter 5
An Unreasonable Sword's Judgment

Chapter 6
A Single-Minded Star

Re:ZeRo

-Starting Life in Another World-

VOLUME 24

TAPPEI NAGATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION: SHINICHIROU OTSUKA

YEN ON
NEW YORK

Copyright

Re:ZERO Vol. 24
TAPPEI NAGATSUKI

Translation by Dale DeLucia
Cover art by Shinichirou Otsuka

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Re:ZERO KARA HAJIMERU ISEKAI SEIKATSU Vol. 24
©Tappei Nagatsuki 2020
First published in Japan in 2020 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.
English translation rights reserved by YEN PRESS, LLC under the license from KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

English translation © 2024 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On
150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor
New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com
facebook.com/yenpress
twitter.com/yenpress
yenpress.tumblr.com
instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: March 2024
Edited by Yen On Editorial: Ivan Liang
Designed by Yen Press Design: Andy Swist

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.
The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Nagatsuki, Tappei, 1987– author. | Otsuka, Shinichirou, illustrator. | ZephyrRz, translator. | DeLucia, Dale, translator.
Title: Re:ZERO starting life in another world / Tappei Nagatsuki ; illustration by Shinichirou Otsuka ; translation by ZephyrRz ; translation by DeLucia, Dale
Other titles: Re:ZERO kara hajimeru isekai seikatsu. English
Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2016– | Audience: Ages 13 & up.
Identifiers: LCCN 2016031562 | ISBN 9780316315302 (v. 1 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316398374 (v. 2 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316398404 (v. 3 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316398428 (v. 4 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316398459 (v. 5 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316398473 (v. 6 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316398497 (v. 7 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975301934 (v. 8 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975356293 (v. 9 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975383169 (v. 10 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975383183 (v. 11 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975383206 (v. 12 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975383220 (v. 13 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975383244 (v. 14 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975383268 (v. 15 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975383282 (v. 16 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975335250 (v. 17 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975335274 (v. 18 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975335298 (v. 19 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975335311 (v. 20 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975335335 (v. 21 : pbk.) | ISBN

9781975335359 (v. 22 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975335373 (v. 23 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975335397 (v. 24 : pbk.)
Subjects: CYAC: Science fiction. | Time travel—Fiction.
Classification: LCC PZ7.1.N34 Re 2016 | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2016031562

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-3539-7 (paperback)
978-1-9753-3540-3 (ebook)

E3-20240221-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

Cover
Insert
Title Page
Copyright

Chapter 1: Waiting for the Ice to Thaw
Chapter 2: In the Future
Chapter 3: —Stand Up
Chapter 4: Five Obstacles
Chapter 5: An Unreasonable Sword's Judgment
Chapter 6: A Single-Minded Star

Afterword
Yen Newsletter

CHAPTER 1

WAITING FOR THE ICE TO THAW

1

—A dark, black, far, deep, long, heavy, bitter darkness.

"_____"

The oppressive, suffocating gloom seemed like the culmination of everything evil in this world, and it enveloped his entire body, refusing to let him go. His face, his torso, his limbs—every bit of skin was stained by inky darkness. He could feel it seeping into his blood like it was desperate to slake a terrible thirst. Before long, he could no longer tell where his body ended and the darkness began.

And it wasn't only his external form that became uncertain.

"_____"

The confusion went deeper, touching upon his true nature. Perhaps even touching his soul.

After losing sight of the essence of what made him *him* and aimlessly wandering for so long, he finally had a small fragment of it at his fingertips. That was what it felt like. This fragment was vague, and the unease and hatred welling inside made him hesitant to bring it closer.

"_____"

Was this the version of himself that he had been searching for?

Would this be the beginning of a completely different self?

It was a bizarre thought, but not an impossible one. He had already experienced things just as shocking and unimaginable. How much time had he wasted simply coming to terms with what was really happening and accepting the trials set before him? How long had it taken him to actively seek out what lay beyond all that?

The answers to those questions were why he was deeply

uneasy.

Was this the right choice? Was this the right place?

Was this the person he wanted to be? The one who was trusted, forgiven, and accepted?

“—I love you.”

His indescribable worries melted away as that guiding voice faded.

Toward the white, bright, high, noble, beautiful, sweet light…

That soul, Subaru Natsuki…

2

Subaru’s consciousness slowly emerged from the abyss of a deep, gentle sleep.

“Ah…”

A faint first gasp slipped from his lips.

It was terribly hoarse and lifeless, but it was unmistakably his own voice. If nothing else, he was sure that he had not been reborn as some voiceless single-celled organism.

That had to count as one step forward. The next step would be making sure he wasn’t a being with some completely different set of values that—

“Subaru? Are you awake?”

“_____”

A sweet, silvery voice rang in his ears.

Clear and gentle, soothing yet steadfast, cheerful and charming.

Just moments ago, he had heard that same voice in the worst possible circumstances.

Hearing it again made his heart leap. His chest ached, and his heart raced as he slowly looked over.

“_____”

Waiting there were violet eyes filled with concern.

“…Emilia…?”

“Yes. Are you all right, Subaru? Can you sit up? Can you talk?”

“Uhhh…”

As he weakly said her name, the girl with purple eyes tilted her head. Her expression relaxed into a small smile, and the long, silver

hair flowing down her alabaster shoulders looked like moonbeams. This dazzling display of beauty struck Subaru right in the heart.

—A girl who was completely out of this world had descended before him.

“Ugh…ah…”

The moment that thought crossed his mind, blood raced to his cheeks. His face was bright red, his eyes swam, and words failed him. The pounding in his ears was so loud it almost hurt. At last, he started babbling incoherently.

“Awawawawa…”

“Awawa…?”

When she saw how shaken he was, Emilia furrowed her beautiful brow.

Even that tiny gesture was mind-blowing. It almost felt like the greatest artist of the era was showing him a second masterpiece. And he was observing it up close—so close, he could feel her breath. Despite how much his chest already hurt, his heart rate just seemed to climb higher and higher.

“_____”

What is this? What’s happening?

Is any of this real? Or is it just a crazy, convincing illusion? Like, when you see a mirage in the desert, it’s always an oasis… That’s just seeing what you want most in that moment, right? If that’s the rule, then is this also a mirage? What an extravagant—

“A-are you all right, Subaru? I think there might be something wrong. You did take a tumble.”

“Hyah!”

“See, you just made a weird sound!”

Subaru was a complete mess. The moment Emilia’s hand touched his forehead, he jolted. Her eyes flashed, as she was now completely convinced that something was definitely wrong. The fact that he could feel her hand disproved his whole Emilia-mirage theory, which made him feel like a scholar of geocentrism.

More importantly, she was real. This Emilia really did exist. And if she was real and calling him Subaru, then he was indeed Subaru Natsuki.

And of course—

“—Don’t ignore Betty. Emilia isn’t the only one who was worried.”

When he heard a childish voice complaining petulantly, Subaru

turned to find a little girl with her cheeks puffed out adorably.

"Beatrice…"

"What a lifeless voice again…and you look almost like you can't believe adorable little Betty is here, I suppose."

Her gaze softened with worry. The words coming out of her mouth were a bit harsh, but her tone was a mixture of concern and relief.

Relief that Subaru had woken up, and concern about the fact that he had passed out in the first place. His heart leaped at that.

And so—

"—Ngaaah?!"

As she fixed him with a cool look, Subaru grabbed her and pulled her into a deep hug.

Light… She was so light.

Beatrice couldn't do anything to resist the sudden movement, and her eyes betrayed her confusion as his arms enveloped her. Sitting on the green bed woven from vines, Subaru confirmed she was real with his entire being.

"Beatrice! Beatrice! Beatriceeee!"

"Wh-wh-wh-what are you doing?! What happened?! This is too sudden!"

"You…your face soothes the soul! Seeing your cute face is like coming home. Ugh, it's so good!"

"I hope that that isn't your poor attempt at a compliment!"

Subaru clearly meant every word. Blushing at everything he said and the sudden hug, Beatrice squeezed his face between her tiny hands. It hurt a little when her fingers adorably pulled at his cheeks and ears, but it also helped confirm that the girl Beatrice was real, too.

"Mrgh! Quit messing around right after you woke up, Subaru! We still don't even know why you collapsed…" And seeing how he was hugging and playing with Beatrice, Emilia spoke, feeling a little bit left out. Still worried about his condition, she gently started to grab his shoulder but then stopped. "…Subaru?"

Emilia was more worried than upset. But the swirl of emotions in her voice quickly gave way to pure concern. Her eyes widened in shock as she looked at Subaru's faintly trembling shoulder.

"…Uh…ngh…"

"Subaru? Subaru, what is it? Betty is here. It's all right. It's all right, Subaru. You don't have to cry."

As she realized Subaru's voice had caught in his throat and he was sobbing, the confusion disappeared from Beatrice's face, and she gently caressed his damp cheek.

He refused to let go of Beatrice's little hand. Realizing his trembling was an expression of worry and fear, Beatrice immediately comforted him, like she was saying *Don't cry. You're not alone. It's okay.*

"Please don't cry, Subaru. There's no rush. Deep breaths. Slowly. Beatrice and I are here for you."

Just like Beatrice, Emilia wanted to help Subaru calm down. Her hand that had hesitated before now rested on his shoulder, and anyone could tell by listening to her ringing voice that she respected Subaru Natsuki.

"_____"

The two of them were unchanged. They were exactly the same.

These girls had been unbelievably noble in the face of certain death, in a world that was collapsing. When everything was lost and well beyond the point of no return, they had prioritized Subaru over even themselves. Emilia and Beatrice were unchanged.

He had pinned his hopes on that, confirming that was still true, and this time, he swore he'd do things right. This time, he would regain everything he had lost as *Subaru Natsuki*.

"I'm back…"

Still sobbing and haggard and in an unbearably pathetic and shameful state…

…Subaru Natsuki began a new loop.

3

"So basically, I lost my memories in the Taygeta archive. I might have some issues talking with everyone, and it might be a hassle, but I hope you'll understand."

And with that, after everyone had gathered for breakfast, Subaru politely lowered his head in apology.

The reactions to Subaru's explosive revelation—maybe it was more accurate to call it his carpet-bombing of revelations—were varied. However, confusion and mayhem were the most prominent. It looked like shock and grief would have to come later.

"I'm sure everyone is *really* worried about Subaru, but we have to keep it together, since he's the one who must be most worried…"

Standing next to him, Emilia had an anxious look on her face as she spoke supportively.

Emilia and Beatrice had been initially shaken when they heard about his memory loss, but they still believed him. After his moment of turmoil after waking up in the green room, he immediately told them the truth, then asked for their support at this meeting.

His last time through the loop had been terrifying, and now Subaru Natsuki was charging headlong onto a new path.

He had resolved himself to start life again from zero in another world—or at least that was how he wanted to describe it, but the reality of the situation wasn't nearly that appealing. Making up his mind was good, but there was a distinct possibility that everything could've ended for good with his last death.

He couldn't help feeling grateful and relieved that wasn't the case and that he'd been given this new opportunity to start over by returning from death. But he had no intention of just relying on that.

His ability was powerful, but the trigger—death—was unbelievably agonizing. Considering that was the price for twisting fate, it seemed appropriate. Powerful abilities demanded an equal cost. And Subaru was sure his returning from death was no different.

There was also the possibility that this ability only had a limited number of uses or required sacrificing something precious to try again. He would have to be wary of overusing the ability.

Having thought that far, Subaru—

"Wait, my memories disappearing isn't the price for returning by death…is it?"

"Are you listening, Barusu?"

Ram's stern voice pulled him back to reality. Her pink eyes glared at Subaru as she crossed her arms.

"Despite what Lady Emilia said, Subaru does not appear to be particularly concerned at all… What is this farce, Barusu?"

"This isn't a joke. I came clean about my worries and told the truth. Just imagining the kind of awful tragedy that could happen if I'm weirdly stubborn about it is enough to break my heart."

Ram's eyes hardened as she responded. "A slick turn of phrase. So we're just supposed to believe you after some flippant—?"

The one who halted her frustrated retort was Beatrice, who was

sitting gracefully beside Subaru. “There’s no reason for Subaru to think up tall tales that are in such bad taste. You should understand that, too.” The girl who was always Subaru’s ally pointed at him while looking up at Ram. “And Emilia isn’t lying, either. Subaru has lost his memories, and he is undoubtedly the one most troubled by it. That’s why he cried like a little boy.”

“Bringing that up is a bit embarrassing.” Scratching his cheek awkwardly at that unexpected revelation, Subaru left it at that.

The true reason for his tears was a complex mix of things. The fact that he had come back to life. Being reunited with everyone. Realizing that he had been given another chance.

But still, tears were tears. It was poor manners to probe too deeply about why a man cried.

Either way, Subaru was grateful for Beatrice’s support.

Remembering Beatrice’s fleeting relief and her comment about bringing her out, he could feel an ache in his chest, like a chain was tightening around his heart.

What did that Subaru Natsuki do to Beatrice?

He felt guilty relying on her trust without knowing their shared history. And he was careful to remind himself not to accept her trust as a given.

“Honestly, using the excuse of ‘I have no reason to lie’ to shut down criticism isn’t ideal, but I’m gonna have to ask you to bear with me.”

“So you say…”

“And then let’s talk more constructively. Fortunately, the current me is feeling optimistic. I’ll gladly welcome any discussion that’ll help us move forward…and if there’s something you want to say, I’ll listen.”

Building on top of what Beatrice had already said, Subaru lowered his head again. And Emilia lowered her head, too.

“Please believe him.”

“_____”

Even Ram couldn’t argue when all three of them were acting like this. And so she began to seriously consider the implications if his claim was true.

Ram wasn’t the only one stunned by Subaru’s confession. She’d had the most striking reaction, but the others—Echidna and Julius and Shaula—reacted the same way they had multiple times before.

Though he was sorry for heaping this dilemma onto their laps

again, Subaru was still happy to see them. He could talk with everyone who should have been lost forever.

Gripped by that emotion, the one he focused on the most was—

"—You really are troublesome, mister."

"—Ngh!"

"What's with that reaction? You look like you've seen a ghost. That isn't very nice."

The girl pretending not to be particularly surprised by his revelation was a young assassin with braided dark blue hair, wearing dark clothes.

Meili Portroute was there, moving and talking.

"Meili…"

"Hmmm… So you remember my name… Actually, I can't really tell what's supposed to be different. What did you forget?"

"…Ah, sorry. It's basically sort of like missing episodes. Apparently, I can remember the names of most things, but when it comes to memories of what happened, it gets pretty iffy."

"…So, like…what happened yesterday?" Meili's tone fell slightly, and her eyes narrowed.

"Right."

Subaru answered immediately.

He could have evaded it with a concocted explanation but had decided against it. He wanted to be as honest as possible with them.

"—Yesterday? That's… No, I suppose so," Julius murmured.

The ones who were most shocked by Subaru's revelation might have been Julius and Echidna. The three of them had supposedly participated in a suspicious meeting the previous day.

But putting their reactions aside for a moment…

"Again, Master? How many times are you going to forget me before you're satisfied!" Shaula pursed her lips unhappily while hugging her abundant chest.

Every other time, Subaru had overlooked her rambling, but at this point, it stuck out as an oddity he couldn't ignore anymore.

"I feel a bit weird delving into your nonsense, but did your master really just go around losing his memories that often?"

"…? It happened a lot. When I greeted you in the morning, you'd say 'Who are you again? I don't remember you. I don't know you.' Like I was a random fling."

"Hmm. That doesn't really sound like simple teasing, but it's hard to tell…"

Hypothetically speaking, if Subaru had been on friendly terms with Shaula, that did sound like his sort of joke. On the other hand, he had tried to hide his memory loss from them once before. Under those circumstances, it wouldn't be at all strange for him to use that sort of joke to paper over gaps.

This is seriously a murderous pain in the ass. Actually, I've died four times now, so maybe that's not the best way to put it.

"Honestly, it's still difficult to accept at face value, but…as long as we're staying in this tower, it's probably wise to keep in mind the possibility that a trap or something along those lines might have caused Natsuki's current condition." Echidna began to seriously grapple with the situation.

"The most likely place for it to have happened is where Emilia-chan found me passed out, in Taygeta," Subaru agreed. "Apparently, it was a kinda shady place to begin with."

"Chan…"

"?"

Subaru couldn't help but notice Emilia's lonely murmur. She'd had a similar reaction on several occasions when he talked with her in the last loop. Ultimately, he never learned what the cause was.

Is it some fatal thing I'm missing? …That would be terrifying.

"—Anyway, I'm sorry for surprising everyone. Everyone probably needs some time to settle their thoughts, so why don't we break for a bit? Ram and I can go get some water in the meantime."

With that proposal, Subaru leaped to his feet. Ram's shoulders twitched while Emilia and Beatrice looked at him in concern.

But he simply nodded at the worried pair and fixed his black eyes on Ram.

"Let's go, Ram. You looked like you were about to invite me to go get some water."

"How obscene."

Ram refused to meet his gaze.

4

"So, what was the point of that charade just now? Since you brought me out like this, I take it you intend to explain yourself?"

Ram broke the silence in the hall on the way to get the water. She'd waited long enough for an answer.

Every time they'd had this interaction before, she'd refused to

accept Subaru's claim about losing his memory. It wasn't a simple matter of proof or her being stubborn. Her reason was much more powerful.

—Rem. It had everything to do with Ram's beloved sister, who wouldn't rise from her slumber.

Subaru still didn't know all the details, but there had been some sort of connection between him and Rem. And for Rem's older sister, the existence of that connection was a massive pillar of support.

It made perfect sense that she couldn't simply accept that Subaru had lost his memory.

And so—

"You shouldn't put too large a burden on Lady Emilia's and Lady Beatrice's shoulders. Lady Beatrice aside, it's too much for Lady Emilia. You were right to rely on me. Now explain the—"

"Ram, the truth is that I don't remember. It's not a lie. I'm not bluffing. And it's not a scheme, either."

Ram had been clinging to that slender thread of hope, but Subaru had to burst her bubble.

"_____"

When she heard that, Ram's expression darkened. Subaru could see unease and surprise in her pink eyes…and the sparks of rage.

Those embers grew until they felt like an inferno that scorched Subaru's very soul. And it was none other than Subaru Natsuki who was to blame. His countless acts of insincerity would destroy him.

"I don't remember. All I have are the names of the people here in this tower and our general relation to each other."

"Stop it."

"Emilia and Beatrice were just the first ones to hear. I told them the same thing I told you. There isn't anything more to say. Right now, I don't have anything up my sleeve."

"Stop it, Barusu. If you—"

"I know that we came to this tower to get back a lot of things that were stolen away from us. I also know we're in the middle of some test, but that's it. What my motive is…"

"Don't you dare, Barusu."

"Rem…I—"

"Barusu!!!"

"…I don't remember any of it," Subaru said sorrowfully.

Ram made it clear that she didn't want to hear what he was

saying, but when she heard his apology, she became an avatar of pure wrath as she grabbed him.

“Ghh!”

She hauled him up by his shirt and slammed him against the wall. Using unbelievable force that didn’t seem like it could come from such slender arms, she pinned Subaru in place and glared at him from up close.

Deep in her eyes, the embers he saw earlier had become a roiling flame that threatened to consume them both.

And when that blaze overwhelmed him—or rather, when it overwhelmed Ram—tragedy would repeat itself.

“What’s your game? This…this pointless lie!”

“It’s not a lie…not to you. I wouldn’t—”

“—Wouldn’t lie to me? Then what would you have me do? Just believe you? That you…forgot Rem…? That’s…that’s absurd!”

Her eyes flashed, and she was glaring at him from so close that their lips were almost touching. Subaru finally realized that the roaring fire in her eyes was more grief than anger.

After four times, Subaru could finally grasp a small part of the turmoil in her heart.

How perceptive would he have to be to notice it with no second chances? The way Emilia or Beatrice were able to do. They were all dazzlingly brilliant, but he couldn’t just let himself be stunned by that brilliance.

“I will get Rem back.”

Staring into her pink eyes, Subaru gathered his resolve and said it clear as day. Ram’s eyes widened again in surprise before hiding it immediately in anger.

“Bite your tongue… Get what back? You’ve forgotten Rem!”

“Even so, I will get her back. Rem, my memories, what we came to this tower for—everything. I’ll make sure we get everything we came for, and then we’ll all go home together. We deserve that much.”

“…Barusu?”

“After everything that’s happened here…that’s the only way this should end.”

The atmosphere was heavy. But that wasn’t the reason Subaru wore a bitter expression. Ram furrowed her brow at his reaction and loosened the grip she had on his chest just a little bit.

This time, Subaru grabbed her hands and pulled them away and

then traded places with her.

“—Disgusting. Let me go at once.”

When he pushed her against the wall and brought their faces close together again, Ram demanded that he stop. But her tone was weaker than before. Subaru ignored it and pressed on.

“Ram, I’m going to get them back. My memories and Rem, too. So please, help me.”

“_____”

“I need everyone’s strength. The Subaru Natsuki that you all know, the Subaru Natsuki who existed until today—he might not have needed to say something that pathetic. But I do.”

The one who Julius trusted, who Beatrice believed in, who Echidna forgave, and who Emilia wanted by her side…if it was the Subaru Natsuki everyone expected great things from, then maybe he could have figured a way out of this checkmate on his own.

But this Subaru couldn’t. And he was too loved by the people in this tower to just give up and throw a tantrum about being powerless.

“I get that you can’t believe me or forgive me for forgetting Rem. But please save that anger for later. For now, I’ll make you a promise.”

“A promise…?”

“I swear I’ll do it all. I’ll throw myself into the fight as many times as it takes. And if I ever break this promise, if you ever see me give up, then you can boil me or fry me or whatever you want.”

Ram’s eyes opened wide again as Subaru stared into them from so close, she must’ve felt his every breath. It was like they needed to almost touch to make sure his feelings reached her—

“If I ever give up, you can do whatever you want to me. That’s my punishment for losing all my memories and making you cry.”

“Who’s crying? Don’t be stupid.”

A tremendous slap landed on the side of his face, sending him to the ground.

“Owww?!”

Putting his hand on his red cheek, Subaru looked up at Ram in disbelief.

“Y-you… It took a lot of courage to say all that…”

“What courage is there in riling yourself up? And a promise? From you? Don’t make me laugh. There is nothing less reliable in the entire world.”

“Emilia said that, too, but seriously, how many promises did I break before today?!”

“Have you ever kept one?”

“It’s *that* bad?!”

Subaru adjusted his opinion of the other Subaru Natsuki yet again. The man’s stock price made massive swings in both directions, but news about him never keeping his word led to a big slump.

“Subaru Natsuki really is a terrible guy…”

“Yes, exactly. It seems there’s some misunderstanding, but you have never been the sort of talented man who could take care of things alone. If anything, you are the sort of fool whose true talent lies in always trying to do things alone and making things worse. You have caused me quite a lot of trouble as well.”

“Really? Why did you bring someone like that to this tower…?”

“You always butt in on your own. Admittedly, you have a skill for running your mouth. You’re also handy enough in your own way and suited to miscellaneous chores. And I guess you could at least comfort Lady Emilia and Lady Beatrice. And…”

Subaru sat on the floor cross-legged as Ram laid out all of his shortcomings. She was talking about things he had no knowledge about, but it still felt like he was the one getting all the blame, and it didn’t feel great.

When Emilia and the others said good things about the original Subaru Natsuki, that had been awkward in its own way, but having Ram berate the man at length was also rather strange.

Subaru got a little defiant, deciding to hear it all.

“And what? My legs are short? I have a bad memory? My diet is terrible? I don’t know when to give up?”

“Your legs are short, your memory is horrible, your diet is incredibly unbalanced, and you never know when to give up.”

“Sounds about right.”

“…And you cared about Rem.”

“_____”

Suddenly, there was a change in her voice. It took on a slightly warmer tone.

If her voice had a color, it would be a soft, comforting pink. He could see her gentle love had not faded. Her tender thoughts of her sister and the memory of Subaru Natsuki, who had been at her sister’s side, were alive and well.

It made Subaru imagine a gentle pink color.

"Barusu. Did you really forget Rem?"

"…Yeah…"

Her eyes never wavered. It was inspiring.

If he had heard something he absolutely didn't want to hear in a situation like this, he would have averted his eyes. But she never tried to look away even once.

"Barusu. Will you remember Rem?"

"Yeah. I will. And not just Rem. Everything else, too."

"You don't have to worry about the rest, if it comes down to it. Just remember Rem."

"Give me a break. Just let me get everything back…"

"I shall say it again. You will remember Rem, even if you die."

"Yeah, I swear it. Even if I die, I'll remember everything."

And I mean that literally.

He would get back everything that Subaru Natsuki had seen, heard, felt, and done in this world.

"…Very well. I'll overlook it for now."

The menacing pressure Ram had been giving off suddenly disappeared.

"Is that enough?" Subaru asked from his seat on the ground. "Is just asking for help enough?"

"You're a man, aren't you? Just accept it. I heard your resolve. And you even said I could boil you or fry you or carve you up or tear into you or skewer you or pummel you or whatever I wanted if you give up. If I didn't listen after that, it would cast doubt on my kindly, motherly nature."

"I don't remember saying those parts after the frying bit…"

"Did you say something?"

"Not a word, ma'am."

Shaking his head slowly, Subaru responded politely.

Kindly and *motherly* were a bit of stretch, but even a Buddha's patience would run out after three strikes, and Subaru was already on his fifth attempt.

If he couldn't cling to God or Buddha, then he would have to trust in Ram's motherly affection.

"Stand up, Barusu. I won't allow you to give up or to fall to your knees."

"I'm just sitting down. Don't lump all those things together, please… Upsy-daisy."

Hopping to his feet, Subaru brushed off his backside and faced Ram.

Leaning against the wall, she fixed her rumpled outfit and crossed her arms, looking back at him like usual—or at least what seemed to him to be her usual demeanor.

"…Did you say the same thing to Lady Emilia and Lady Beatrice?"

"The two of them…didn't seem to think there was any chance I might give up."

"That's true. They've been infected by you."

"That's why I can't ask them. Or Julius or Echidna, emotionally speaking."

It probably also had something to do with the fact that he already knew how those four would answer, from interacting with them in the previous loop. He was confirming the remaining answers now.

"Also… Based on what you said, it sounds like I wasn't that special a guy even before today."

"Your value to me changes quite significantly, depending on whether you remember Rem or not. So be careful with your tone."

With that sharp jab, Ram turned and walked away from Subaru.

They had stopped for a long time while getting the water, but if they returned empty-handed, that would just make Emilia and Beatrice worried.

With the bucket in one hand, he hurried after Ram and joined her.

"I…Subaru Natsuki, really was here, right?" Subaru asked softly as he looked over at Ram. It was more like an uneasy whimper than a question seeking actual confirmation. He probably shouldn't have asked this right after swearing he wouldn't give up no matter what. It wouldn't have been strange for Ram to reprimand him for saying that before the ink had even dried on his promise.

"Idiot."

But she did not. Without stopping, mercifully, she just insulted him.

"You only lost sight of yourself for a brief moment. It just feels like you disappeared because you are hidden beneath a slew of things that have all piled up together. Like a flower buried in the cold snow that shows itself once the spring comes. That's all it is."

Ram didn't let her emotions show, and Subaru couldn't, either.

Not now, just moments after acting so cool. He couldn't let her see him looking so pathetic now.

In that moment, Ram making a point of not looking at him and not saying anything else really did feel like a mother's kindness.

5

The situation had changed significantly—or at least that's what Subaru wanted to think, even if it wasn't necessarily true.

This wasn't the first time he had come clean about his memory loss, and he had seen everyone accept the shock before, too, even if it was just on the surface.

But just by changing his mindset and stance, he'd changed his perspective, too.

Last time, he had doubted everyone and suspected everything they did or said. He probed them from all angles, totally convinced they were plotting something.

But after removing that filter of doubt, what came through in all of their actions and words was pure concern for Subaru.

Basically, they were taking great pains not to upset him. Their attitudes only seemed suspicious and unnatural because he was looking for something to be afraid of.

"Do this right. Do this right, Subaru Natsuki…"

Spurring himself on, he looked down at his palm.

Whatever caused him to lose his memory, the odds were high it was in Taygeta. Making it through the examinations was crucial, but they also needed to discover the cause of the memory loss, too.

It was something that had not occurred to him before, but if someone other than Subaru also lost their memory, the situation was going to start getting stupid as everyone had to introduce themselves again.

And also, they didn't really have the time to spare taking things at a leisurely pace.

"Last time and the time before, the tower ended up a chaotic mess."

The time before, Subaru had discovered everyone's corpses one after the other—or at least the corpses of everyone other than Emilia and Beatrice.

And last time, he had witnessed everyone's death, one after the other, sending his heart into ruin.

That disaster wasn't far in the future. Knowing the greatest tragedy was lying in wait for them, he had a duty to prevent it. He would do everything he could in order to avoid that. And so the first thing he did…

"_____"

…was stand at the ledge near the spiral staircase. Behind him, he detected a faint breath.

Someone was approaching with a moderate degree of stealth, just barely noticeable if he focused. Using his cheat-like foreknowledge, he turned around at the last moment.

"—!"

"Whoops, watch out. Don't go falling instead of me."

The assailant's outthrust hands hit nothing but air, and Subaru caught them as they started to stumble forward. Their body was light, not in an ominous way, but in a way befitting their appearance.

"Now then, let's chat. You're gonna take some responsibility for killing me."

Saying that, Subaru smiled as he revealed his stunning power of deduction to Meili, the person who had pushed him down twice before.

CHAPTER 2

IN THE FUTURE

1

“_____”

On the verge of stumbling over the edge herself, Meili widened her eyes as Subaru steadied her.

Looking into her eyes, he couldn’t help having mixed feelings.

Using what he’d gained from Return by Death, he had effectively prevented a tragedy, which was good. But it also proved that he had been pushed to his doom by this young girl on two separate occasions.

The culprit who had sent him tumbling to his death was Meili Portroute, the person who the other Subaru Natsuki had promptly removed from the equation in the last loop.

“…Take responsibility for killing you? That’s a strange thing to say, mister.”

For a moment, her eyes darted in panic, but her expression quickly softened as she traced her finger around Subaru’s arm wrapped around her torso, flashing a sweet smile.

She changed her position, moving over to the stairs before facing Subaru again.

“Maybe you lost something more than just memories? Otherwise, you wouldn’t make such a terrible mix-up.”

“Oh yeah?”

“I mean, obviously? Me trying to kill you? That’s an awful misunderstanding.”

Meili flashed an innocent smile while holding her hands behind her back.

Even Subaru couldn’t help losing a bit of steam after seeing her

feign innocence so confidently. He had not expected her to deny it once he'd caught her red-handed. But if it was *her*…if it was Meili, he could understand.

She was stubborn. Or less charitably, she acted haphazardly.

In a certain sense, she behaved like a wild animal. Also, she had been a little too heavily influenced by the person she chose as a role model.

"I'm hurt that you'd suspect me. If I was going to kill you, it would have been a lot easier out there in the desert than in here, right? Ah, you don't remember, so maybe you didn't know that."

"That's right. It is a weird story. If you were really trying to kill us before, you must have had plenty of opportunities. But you didn't."

"Right? So—"

"But the story changes if you suddenly gained a new motive this morning. Or I guess it would be more accurate to call it a chain reaction, starting from last night."

"_____"

Meili's expression changed. She pursed her lips, and her calm smile disappeared. A heavy sigh escaped her. And then she shrugged in a terribly world-weary way that was at odds with her youthful appearance.

"…Am I being set up?"

"In what way?"

"You were testing me, weren't you? Lying about losing your memories, seeing if I would push you over the edge… Now that we're at the tower, I'm not useful anymore. It's the perfect time to take care of loose ends."

Subaru was sad to hear her so calmly comment on her unfavorable position and on how she wasn't the same as everyone else.

It was true that he had been testing her, though he had not intended anything malicious. Even if he denied that, he wouldn't be very convincing.

But he could go beyond her expectations.

"So, how are you going to finish me? Push me off here as a neat bit of revenge? I don't have my mean pets with me now, so you can erase someone like me easily, even by yourself."

"Don't get the wrong idea, Meili. I wasn't lying about losing my memory to trick you. That's the truth, and it's honestly a serious

problem."

"You can say that, but it's hard to believe you… What do you want, then, mister? Do you think it won't feel real if you can't feel it yourself?" Meili wrapped her hands around her slender neck and stuck her tongue out.

"Agh…"

Subaru's heart leaped in his chest. But Meili was just being sarcastic. It wasn't as though she had remembered how she'd been murdered.

In that sense, the little assassin was landing one critical hit after another on Subaru's heart.

"I wouldn't recommend something too drawn out. I don't want to suffer personally, but also you don't seem good at hiding things —"

"—I have no intention of killing you or hurting you. Whether today or tomorrow, I intend to act the same around you as I always have."

"…Huh?"

Meili's face changed again.

But this time, it was completely different from before, when she'd immediately selected the most appropriate response. This time, there was obvious confusion on her face. She looked at Subaru with incomprehension.

Subaru simply nodded.

"Fortunately, you were stopped before things went too far, so as long as this stays a secret between us, we can just pretend nothing happened. I had to catch you in the act is all, since if I merely avoided the danger, you might have kept plotting different ways to kill me. If you want to call it bad taste, I won't deny it. Sorry."

"Agh…wh-what…?"

"But you understand now, right? Trying to do something to me is pretty risky for you. If this isn't enough to convince you, then fine. But at least talk with me. If there's something bothering you, I'll lend an ear as best I can…"

"Bothering me? Like what…?" Meili's voice was soft and quivering. And then pursing her lips, she shouted. "What about this situation?! That's what's bothering me right now!"

Subaru was trying to settle things amicably, for some reason. Meili's only reaction was to stare at him in absolute disbelief.

"I can't believe it… I can't, I can't…"

She restlessly touched her braided hair as she howled.

It was a coping mechanism, but also a sign of her dependence on a certain someone who sported the same hairstyle. At least, that was how it looked to Subaru.

“You clearly don’t realize what I was about to do just now! There’s no way! Otherwise, it wouldn’t make any sense. Otherwise…”

She faltered, desperately arguing why this was all wrong.

Seeing her this flustered was a first for Subaru—no, there was that other time inside the book of the dead.

Last night, when she ran into Subaru in Taygeta, after she was upset, after her conversation with the other Subaru Natsuki, she decided to kill him after he lost his memory.

But that sort of impromptu murder was a double-edged sword.

Since he had died, Subaru had no way of knowing what sort of alibi she had planned to use once he was found dead. There was always the chance of it being ruled an accident, but that was a difficult needle to thread. Given what he knew about Emilia and Beatrice, as well as about Ram and the others, he couldn’t imagine them not insisting on getting to the bottom of his death.

And if that happened, there was no way for Meili to avoid being caught.

Ram, Julius, and Echidna were far smarter than Subaru. They would almost certainly solve it without having to die even once first. And it was hard to believe Meili didn’t realize that.

That left one explanation…

“It’s an impulsive crime.”

She had made no attempt to create an alibi or to hide the evidence.

She didn’t have any choice but to act. Because murder had become a habit. Because the life Meili had lived was so harsh that she couldn’t conceive of any other alternatives.

“You’ve just gotten in the habit of killing. You just can’t think of any other ways of dealing with things. But that isn’t your fault.”

“—! Don’t talk like you know me! What do…what do you know about me?!”

“But I do know.”

“_____”

He answered her furious eruption with a cool, calm confidence. Looking her straight in the eye, he said it firmly and directly.

“Meili, I know you. It might sound creepy, but there’s probably nobody in this world who knows you better than I do.”

Seeing Subaru shrug, Meili gave him a terrified look. It was a natural reaction, but it also hurt Subaru. He struggled to convey the twisted, almost narcissistic sort of affection he felt for Meili.

“_____”

He could remember all of her provocations. The voice whispering in his ears as he acted, pushing him toward the solution of murder again and again, tempting him to take the worst and yet safest path.

The goading of the dead Meili Portroute, who had merged with Subaru’s mind when he read her book of the dead…

“—No, that’s not right.”

He shook his head to stop shifting the blame to the girl who had been killed.

The whispering voice that had tempted him while he was in the grips of dark paranoia. He hadn’t heard it once this time. *—No, I’m never going to hear it again.*

What are you doing? Look at her, right there in front of you. Look at her confusion, her fear. Remember what you saw in her book of the dead.

Considering the anguish she must have been feeling, Subaru knew she wasn’t the kind of person who would egg on others to commit murder.

It wasn’t Meili who had merged with him after he read her book of the dead. It was just his own weak will deceiving him.

—After all, she had never once actually appeared in front of him.

“_____”

In an awful, one-sided way, Subaru had experienced Meili’s life through the book of the dead.

He’d watched her from the moment she’d gained awareness, and he’d seen the development of her identity, her way of life, and how her short life meaninglessly ended.

During those days, Meili had felt an emptiness that she didn’t let others see, an experience that had given her the terror to match that overwhelming void, as well as the one and only shining emotional attachment she had formed.

And the name of that person was—

“Elsa Gramhilde.”

“!”

“She’s the reason why you tried to kill me, right?”

Meili’s reaction to that name was dramatic. Her sweet, adorable face was warped by anguish, and her pea-green eyes opened as wide as they could go.

This was anger. Anger at someone traipsing with muddy boots into a place she didn’t want anyone to go, a thing she didn’t want anyone to touch.

And she took decisive action to stop him from trampling on it any further.

He didn’t have any time to stop her.

“No one knows how I—!”

Screaming as tears ran down her cheeks, Meili turned and threw herself over the edge.

Wasting his effort to keep her from falling before, she leaped into the void herself, to hide her feelings.

2

—Elsa Gramhilde was an outrageous woman.

“I was told to bring you back, so you’ll be coming with me.”

Their first meeting was awful. Despite her not understanding the basic concepts of liking or hating things, it was undoubtedly the worst. There was nothing redeemable about that woman.

The beasts that had somehow managed to care for a little human girl when she had nothing—the woman killed them all and then dragged that girl out of the forest.

Elsa was indifferent throughout the ordeal, saying that this was unavoidable, since she had been given an order and was wholly unconcerned about killing the beasts who had been at the girl’s side for as long as she could remember.

She thought about killing the woman.

Time and time again, she waited for an opening until finally she found her chance and sank her fangs into the woman’s neck…

“—? What? Stop it, that tickles.”

Peering down at her, the woman sounded as if she didn’t feel anything at all.

The malnourished girl was just skin and bones. She was dragged out of the woods and given a bath against her will. Then

she rejected the frilly clothes she was given, and she tried to kill the woman again.

Elsa just shook her head in boredom, as if nothing of substance had happened.

In that moment, the emotions the girl couldn't put into words—words she didn't even have—came bubbling out as she burned with a need for vengeance.

Throwing aside the clothes she was given, she launched herself at Elsa. Beasts didn't have a custom of wearing clothes. All they needed was what they were born with.

"Are you trying to get that dirty rag back? I'm not too concerned with fashion, either, but you're quite the strange one, too."

"Auu, aoooooo, aooooo…!"

"You're quite hotheaded, aren't you, Meili?"

Meili.

At some point, Elsa started calling her that. Meili, the girl who tried again and again to take back what had been stolen from her and get revenge for her slain kindred.

"Seems like that's your name? It was hard to make out, but it was sewn into that rag of yours… Maybe it belonged to someone else, but it's inconvenient not having a name to call you, so…" Elsa smiled sweetly. "You're Meili from now on. That's what I'm going to call you."

—Elsa Gramhilde was an awful woman.

"Don't become that person's puppet. No matter how many lives you have, it won't be enough. Not for anyone besides me."

She had met Mother for the first time and experienced her first "punishment."

When Mother's hand touched her, Meili felt herself change into something entirely different. She became a beast. Then a bird. Then a fish. Then an insect. She transformed into something impossible to describe before becoming a mass of flesh.

But the worst was the experience of splitting into countless pieces.

The girl Meili had been changed into no fewer than a hundred frogs, each jumping around with a mind of its own. That branded

her soul with the fear that she might cease to exist.

She would never dare to disobey Mother after that.

Her spirit was broken, and she would be nothing less than absolutely obedient if it meant she could avoid ever experiencing that again.

“You’re shivering. Are you cold?”

The black-haired woman cocked her head in confusion. She didn’t attempt to understand Meili’s feelings at all. What a truly awful woman.

Meili trembled as the fear consumed her, while Elsa sat next to her and wrapped an arm around her without another word.

She wasn’t shivering from the cold, but she couldn’t explain herself with words. All she was left with was frustration and anxiety.

That’s why—

“? Could you not? That tickles.”

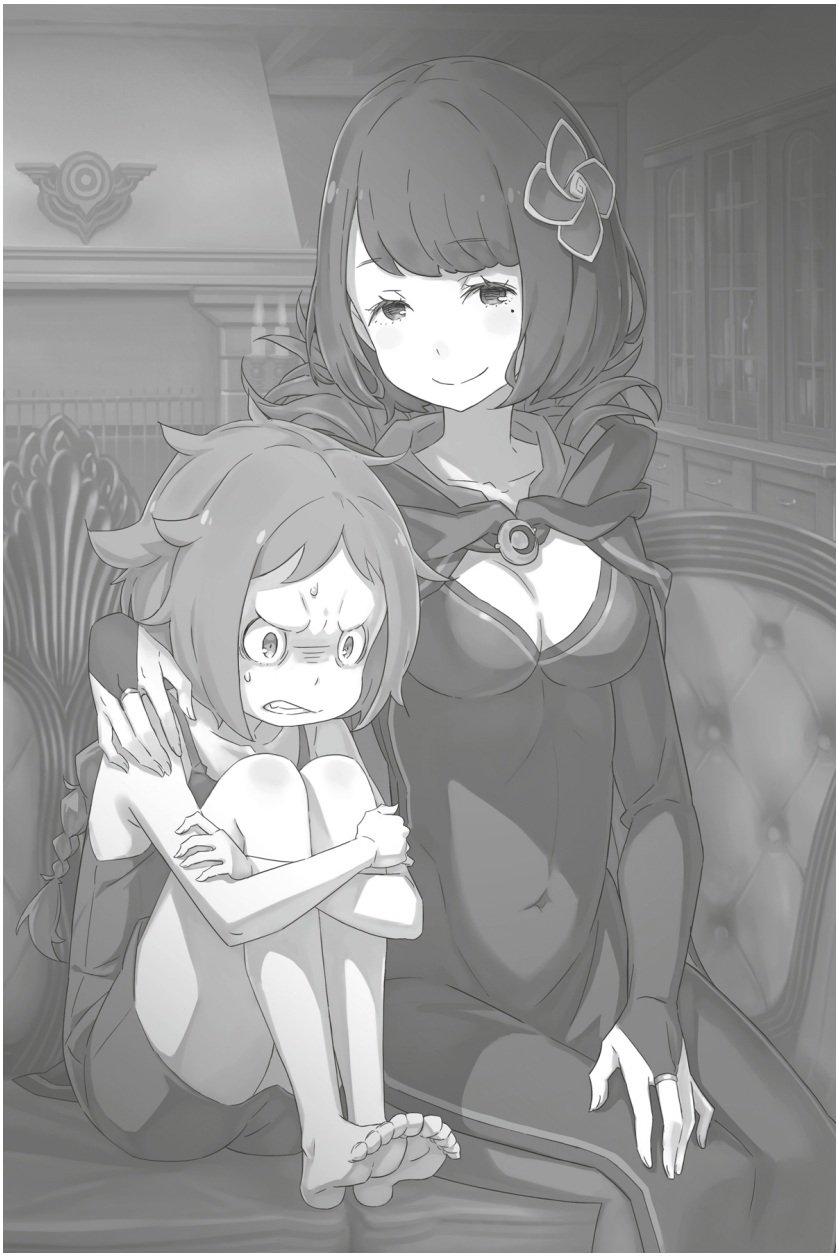
—Meili bit Elsa in the neck.

—Elsa Gramhilde was a disgusting woman.

“Meili, it’s getting annoying, so could you braid my hair?”

At some point, the young Elsa had matured into a full-fledged woman, and the beast Meili had become a proper girl. Through all those years, she had remained with Elsa.

She knew how to talk now. —She modeled her speech after Elsa’s.



She started wearing clothes. —She dressed just like Elsa.

She also started doing jobs. —She learned how by watching Elsa.

—And she kept all that a secret from Elsa.

“Meili? Are you listening? I’m asking for help with my hair.”

“—Yes, I heard you. You really are sloppy, Elsa.”

Sitting together on a soft sofa, she snorted as Elsa leaned her head against her shoulder. Undoing her long black hair, Elsa seemed more carefree than usual.

That careless attitude got on her nerves.

“Omph.”

“? That’s ticklish.”

Just like so many times before, she bit into Elsa’s throat.

She could bite harder, enough to break the skin and make it hurt. Meili wasn’t a weak, frail beast anymore. She ate plenty, learned to talk, gained a name, and had gotten to know Elsa. So…

“Grrn!”

“…You’re a strange girl.”

Glancing over at Meili biting into her neck, Elsa softened her expression and let Meili have her revenge.

Elsa was an outrageous woman. And an awful woman. And also a disgusting woman.

She became so big, Meili didn’t want her to disappear.

She was an outrageous, awful, disgusting part of Meili’s life.

Her presence was so large that calling her a part of Meili’s life didn’t do it justice.

If that was going to be revealed and violated—if Elsa Gramhilde was going to be killed, then Meili Portroute would—

3

“…It would have been a lot better if you had just let me end it.”

“Sorry about that. But the Natsuki family style is to barge right into other people’s hearts, though we do make sure to take our shoes off before stepping into their homes.”

Kenichi Natsuki was open and honest, without any trace of bashfulness. Nahoko Natsuki always moved at her own pace, firing

off strings of strange comments wherever she went, but she never let anything important slip past her.

As a member of the Natsuki family, Subaru Natsuki boldly charged into the young assassin's heart.

"_____"

Meili was limp. Subaru's arm was wrapped around her waist as he clenched his jaw and adjusted his left hand's grip on the whip currently tied to the stairs.

When Subaru said Elsa's name, Meili had suddenly jumped, trying to kill herself. He didn't have time to stop her.

But he had prepared in advance for this possibility.

"I told you, no one in this world understands you better than I do."

"…That's gross…"

"Don't say that," Subaru said with an awkward smile. "That was just a turn of phrase to get you to listen to me."

But even if she hated him, even if she rejected him, he couldn't change the simple truth of it. He understood her feelings painfully well.

The thing that drove her to the impulsive violence deeply rooted in the bottom of her heart was the murderer who Subaru Natsuki didn't know and yet who felt impossibly close.

"_____"

Thinking about her brought relief and yearning, grief and fury, and emptiness—what Meili felt about her was both complicated and incredibly simple.

—Meili idolized Elsa, loved her, and looked up to her.

And when she lost her, Meili felt a murderous urge emerge from the grief, the pain, the hatred, and the disappointment.

Joining them on this journey while hiding any trace of her desire for vengeance—wasn't the sort of performance Meili was capable of. In fact, she was almost impossibly awkward. Even though no one would've blamed her for calling Subaru and the others her hated enemies, she didn't know why she would do such a thing. That's why there was no need for her to put on any act. She genuinely didn't realize it herself.

She didn't realize she had lost something precious. She was a sad girl so clueless that she didn't understand how deep the wound to her heart was.

Meili Portroute was a killer created by her surroundings.

“You wanted revenge?”

“…I don’t know…”

“Even if you did, Elsa…”

“Wouldn’t want that. I know.”

Meili shook her head.

Subaru understood what she was feeling. And she knew that his words were on the mark.

In this moment, they were on equal ground.

“…Why did you try to save me?”

“_____”

“I tried to… You already knew even before I jumped, right? That’s weird. You’re weird…”

“Yeah, I can’t disagree there. But…I hardly know anything in this world, and if you disappeared, it would get just that much more lonely. Maybe that’s why.”

Meili was lifeless, like she had fully accepted death, but she bit her lip. Subaru’s answer couldn’t have been what she wanted to hear. But he couldn’t give her what she wanted. It was a story and motive that he didn’t know.

What she really wanted was to talk with someone she could never meet again.

“You won’t be able to hear her voice anymore.”

“_____”

“Even if you found her name in the books of the dead, it won’t tell you anything about the future.”

The girl who had no idea how to deal with her emotions had become impossibly lost, and the only way she knew how to solve problems was by killing. It was tragic from beginning to end.

Subaru hated the world for not giving her any other choice.

Even Elsa’s way of living, which Meili yearned for so badly, couldn’t help her. Elsa might have been a light for Meili, but the path she illuminated was too thorny for a normal person to walk.

“I’m sure you don’t know what to do with all the emotions you may or may not be feeling. And you probably won’t be able to reach an answer right away. So…”

“_____”

“Just leave it all to me. I won’t do anything bad. At the very least, I’ll do my best not to let things go too badly. As long as that’s what you want.”

“…I…don’t believe you. You’ll say anything if it’s convenient.”

Meili stared at the ground, refusing to agree even after hearing Subaru's speech.

Of course she did. This was the path she had followed all her life, and he was asking her to find another way to live that didn't exist in her dictionary.

And on top of that, the one asking was Subaru Natsuki, who was talking as if he knew everything, without any explanation of how he could possibly begin to understand.

And the worst part was that he was the sort of person who would lure her out here, knowing that he might get pushed to his death. The entire scenario was dubious enough that even Subaru had a hard time believing it himself.

So he had expected her to refuse and had prepared a plan B.

"Okay, I get why you can't take me at my word. It seems like I was a serial promise-breaker before today. So here's what we'll do."

"What?"

"Instead of a promise between you and me, we'll make it a promise between you and *us*."

"_____"

Meili furrowed her brow, clearly not following. But the answer soon became clear.

"Mm-hmm. It's all right. I heard it all, so I'll be the witness."

"—!"

Meili twitched and slowly looked up. As she did, a face came into view—Emilia's. She was holding on to the whip that was caught on the stairs.

Straining with her slender arms, she pulled both of them up with surprising ease. After safely making it back from that dangerous midair stunt, Subaru raised his hand in gratitude.

"Thanks, Emilia-chan… Honestly, I was scared to death."

"That's my line! Sheesh! I never expected you to jump, too. My heart almost jumped out of my chest."

Looking away in a huff, Emilia scolded his recklessness. And unable to make an excuse for himself, Subaru sheepishly scratched his head.

Kneeling on the stairs, Meili looked on with unfocused eyes.

"Miss…you…heard…?"

"Yes. Subaru asked me to be here…to help you if it looked like things might get dangerous. And it's a good thing he did." Emilia pouted and glared at Subaru.

Meili pointed at herself, still confused.

“For me…? Not for him…?”

“Yes, ‘in case anything happens to Meili.’ That’s what you meant, right, Subaru?”

“That’s right. This was the only bit I was genuinely worried about.”

Knowing that she would attempt to push him off the edge, Subaru had been confident he could keep that from happening. But he could also envision her throwing herself over the edge once she’d been cornered.

They had managed to avoid both worst-case scenarios. But what concerned him most was what the other Subaru Natsuki might do.

—The words *Subaru Natsuki was here* had been scrawled all over the room.

The one thing he wasn’t sure about was whether that Subaru Natsuki might try to do something to Meili.

Hypothetically speaking, if murdering Meili in the last loop was intended as an act of self-defense, then it was entirely possible that the other Subaru Natsuki might do something rash when they caught Meili at the scene of the crime.

That was why Subaru entrusted that problem to someone who was demonstrably stronger than he was. He was confident that even if the other Subaru Natsuki took control, Emilia—that all his comrades—would be able to do something.

“Listen, Meili. I believe what Subaru said. If you still can’t trust him, then we can just keep an eye on Subaru together. And if he does break his promise, then I’ll get mad at him with you.”

“Keep an eye on him…? That’s weird, isn’t it? You both should be…watching me…”

“If you ever try to do something bad, then it will be because Subaru broke his promise. So I’m watching Subaru to make sure he keeps his promise. That way, everything works out, right?”

“_____”

Meili was completely thrown off by the way Emilia asserted that as if it was irrefutable logic. Before she recovered, Subaru elaborated.

“Basically, you *almost* did something wrong, but thanks to our efforts, it didn’t happen. So this is a chance to figure out what you should do instead. Whether you can find an answer that doesn’t involve killing me… Well, that’ll be our little wager, won’t it?”

“What will…?”

“Whether you’ll still feel like you have to kill me or not once you’ve sorted out your feelings. I’ll be doing my best with the ethics lessons, too.” Subaru smiled unreassuringly.

That was the path Subaru was trying to guide Meili toward. If he was being honest, it was none of his business. Meili had chosen her own way of life, and he was just butting in to show her a new possibility.

But if she rejected it, her path would end here in this tower. She couldn’t clear this tower together with everyone, using what was familiar.

Moreover…

“I won’t let you stop here. I don’t know how old you are exactly…but when I was about your age, I got a lot of help from the adults around me.”

“_____”

“So even if you hate me for it, I’m going to help you. You’re too lovable to go around rejecting everyone’s help when you don’t know what to do.”

Subaru put his hands under her arms and lifted her light body, before setting her back on her feet.

Her body shuddered, and she peered up at him with unsure eyes. Subaru patted her head as kindly as he could.

Not strangling her. He offered a different solution from the other Subaru Natsuki.

Meili wasn’t someone who needed to die. And…

“Please, Meili. Believe Subaru…believe us.”

“…Ah.”

Emilia hugged Meili from behind as Subaru patted her head. Emilia gently embraced her, putting her cheek to Meili’s as the young girl bit her pale lips.

“This tower is too small a place for you to decide something so big.”

“_____”

“After we get out of here, when we’re in a more open place, you can give us your answer. We’ll do our best to get there.”

Bottling up emotions in a confined space was bad for a child’s growth.

Even after choosing his words as best he could, that had been the best description Subaru could come up with, but Emilia

expressed it better with her kind words and earnest feelings.

Meili's eyes drifted, like she was lost in thought.

"I don't want to…forget Elsa…"

"Yeah. That's fine. You don't have to forget about someone you love. But…just…"

Subaru thought of the beautiful dark woman he had seen in the book of the dead.

She was, above all, mysterious. He'd had no interactions with her, but he still felt like he knew her. Curiously, when he thought about her, Subaru rubbed his stomach subconsciously.

"Even if it's someone you love, maybe don't copy her too closely?"

That was all he asked.

—Still unsure, Meili nodded meekly, and after that, there was a long, long silence.

4

"Honestly, that was very scary. But you asked, so Betty held it in."

"Master's a man who can't die. I wasn't worried at all. If anything, I thought kiddo number two would explode into a million pieces the moment she stood behind him."

"Aghhh…"

Seeing them slowly walk up the stairs, Meili flushed red in the face, and she flapped her mouth a couple times as she struggled to find the words.

Subaru waved at the two joining them.

"Hey, thanks for the support. It was a relief not having to worry about anything falling through the cracks."

"Even if it was you asking, Betty isn't sure if she would forgive you if you really did fall. So consider yourself lucky."

Beatrice was hiking her dress up as she climbed the stairs. Behind her was Shaula, with her hands clasped behind her head. Subaru had asked them to stand by on the bottom floor.

"Wh-wh-wh…m-mister? What are they…?"

Meili spun toward Subaru. She looked stunned and possibly like she wanted to complain about him not mentioning them before.

"I mean…" Subaru crossed his arms. "Planning to jump after you was a cool plan and all, but even a small mistake would mean we'd both die, right? That's a little too dangerous."

“B-but that’s why you had her watching out for me, right…?”

“I know Emilia-chan is way more powerful than she looks, with her crazy cuteness and everything, but there’s always a chance things could go sideways. It wouldn’t be funny if she ended up getting dragged down with us, too.”

In fact, at the end of the last loop, the two of them had fallen to their deaths together. He had held on to her, but he couldn’t save her. And that memory was like a splinter that jabbed deep into his heart.

“To make sure that worst case didn’t happen, I made some extra arrangements. With Beatrice and Shaula watching from below, I thought that would be enough to be absolutely sure.”

“You went that far? …There must have been an easier, smarter way.”

Meili averted her eyes. Her shame at having some of her secret revealed was fading, but in its place was an overwhelming sense of embarrassment.

“Yeah, true.” Subaru scratched his cheek. “I’m sure there was an easier, smarter way to do this. But…”

“But?”

“In my mind, doing things the easy way usually means there’s a compromise involved, and doing things smarter makes it sound like something a scheming neighbor might do. I… Well, I just didn’t want to compromise or resort to tricks.”

Meili almost closed her eyes, and she bit her lip ever so slightly.

Watching her with an awkward smile, Subaru clenched his fists. He wanted to fix everything. Wished he could fix everything.

Subaru wanted to do everything he could.

“And that’s why I asked Emilia-chan, and why I didn’t hesitate to ask the others for help, either.”

“Mm-hmm. That’s right. I was surprised when Subaru brought this up,” Emilia said. She peered at Subaru while still resting her chin on Meili’s shoulder and hugging her from behind.

“But I could tell immediately he was *really* serious. Plus…”

“What?”

“I was glad that you came to me for help. You always plan to settle everything by the time I realize what’s going on.” When she smiled at him, her purple eyes took Subaru’s breath away. His cheeks tensed while Emilia’s expression softened as she nodded. “So, I was happy that you came to me from the start this time and

we had a chance to think it over together. Hee-hee. It's a little strange."

"…Not much point in saying it now, but I'm pretty pissed at the old me. But getting to see your face and hear your voice right now is something only I get to do, so I guess I got the better end of the deal…? What do you think, Emilia-chan?"

"Sorry, I don't really know what you're talking about."

Subaru's shoulders slumped as she ignored his rambling with a smile. The two climbing the stairs finally joined the three at the top.

"It's a relief that nothing happened."

"That's a misleading way of putting it. Considering all the changes in Meili's mindset…is that really nothing?"

"Oooh, that's Master for ya! No clue what the heck you're saying, but when it comes to things that *feel* meaningful, you're the best!"

"Do you actually respect me?"

One explanation was that Shaula was reflexively impressed by anything he said, but when he mentioned wanting to help Meili, she had been the first to agree. There was a part of him that felt like she would support just about anything he proposed, but it was also true that just having her be there was a huge help.

"Umm, Beatrice…are you not…mad at me?"

"Of course Betty is mad. But your plot was stopped before Betty snapped and had to step in. And there's also the incident in the desert to consider, so let's say you've broken even."

"……"

"However! That only covers what has happened on this trip. There is still your crime of burning down Betty's archive in the old mansion. So long as that remains, Betty will not forgive you for now."

Crossing her short arms, Beatrice answered Meili with a stern look. Meili caught her breath, but Emilia started giggling.

"It might've been hard to make out, but Beatrice just said, 'for now.' If you're a good girl, she'll forgive you. She's *really* nice."

"Emilia! Don't say things like that!"

Emilia simply laughed while Beatrice went red when her stern demeanor's soft underbelly was revealed.

"…I'll be as careful as I can be…," Meili answered quietly.

Subaru nodded, pleased with how things were turning out.

This is enough to say I've finally made some real progress, right?

At the very least, he had managed to stop the girl who felt compelled to kill him. But progress alone wasn't enough. There was more than one tragedy lurking in wait in this tower…

"—Is this really okay, Master?"

"Huh?"

While he was thinking, Shaula casually chimed in.

Her eyes narrowed as she stood next to him, watching Emilia, Beatrice, and Meili's exchange.

"She tried to kill you. Are you really going to let her off scot-free?"

That's a heavy question… But yeah, I'm fine with it. If you're talking punishment, Meili already had one. But why should she have to be punished? No one ever taught her any better. That's what I'm going to teach her now."

"You said it already, but what if she tries to kill you again?"

"That would mean I'm a pretty awful teacher. But I'm not going to be doing it alone, either."

That was his answer.

Even in ideal circumstances, it would be hard for him to instill a new set of values in a girl who'd been raised to be an assassin from a young age, especially all by himself. If he was being honest, Subaru doubted he could carry such a heavy burden.

But he wasn't alone. He had relied on the others to stop Meili's assault. And he would have Emilia and Beatrice with him in the future, too.

"Of course, I'm going to count on your help, too, Shaula. When it comes to changing hearts and minds, that's a marathon, not a sprint."

"…Me too?" Shaula pointed at herself in surprise.

"Yeah, obviously. You…well, with you, you're probably more of an example of what not to do, but I'm not gonna leave you out of the group. You've got a motherly figure, so it'd be good if you could work on getting through to Meili's stubborn heart," Subaru said with a casual shrug.

He was left wondering what was so surprising about that, but since Shaula overreacted all the time, he just wrote it off as another one of her episodes and didn't think too hard about it.

Shaula squeezed her face in her hands.

"Me too? Me…and Master… Eh-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee…"

“Uh…what’s up with you…?”

“Nothing! I decided! I’m gonna raise kiddo number two into a proper person, just like you told me to, Master!”

Her face suddenly brightened, and Shaula rushed over to the three of them. Lifting Meili’s little body up, she hugged the girl tightly to her voluptuous bosom.

“Gahhh?! Wh-what is it? Don’t surprise me like that!”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Just rely on me all you want, kiddo number two. My chest belongs to Master, but for now, I’ll share it with you, too!”

“Umm, mister?! You said something weird to her again, didn’t you!” Meili raised her voice accusatorily as Shaula did whatever she pleased.

“Just think of it as the punishment for making everyone worry and indulge her.”

“…Sheesh, you’re all so hopeless. Fine, I’ll allow it. But don’t tell anyone else about what happened here.”

Meili’s cheeks puffed out as she was enveloped by Shaula’s breasts.

However, Subaru scratched his head awkwardly at her answer. Her brow furrowed at that, and Emilia spoke up for him.

“Umm, Meili…it’s *really* hard to say this, but…”

“…I have a bad feeling about this.”

Whether her premonition was on the mark was easy to tell from her reaction to what Emilia was about to say…

“Subaru also asked Ram and the others who aren’t here to help you.”

The way Meili’s face puckered up was almost impressive.

5

“Looks like you took care of everything. Not bad. I’ll even compliment the effort.”

Ram was standing there with her hands on her hips when Subaru and the others came back to the room they used for meals and meetings—which was referred to as the common room, for the time being.

That was probably high praise, coming from Ram. Subaru had talked a big game about helping Meili, so it was a relief to have something to show for it.

“This probably goes without saying, but she was waiting there for you to come back the whole time.”

“That should in fact have gone without saying. Control yourself, Echidna.” Ram’s eyebrows arched sharply as she said that.

“Acting like that the moment you find out it’s me controlling this body? That’s nice.” Echidna smiled and then looked past Subaru. “So, why is she sulking?”

Meili groaned behind Shaula’s back before looking away in a huff. She was definitely pouting.

“That isn’t because she’s mad her plan failed, right?”

“No, no. You’ve got it wrong. She’s just embarrassed that everyone figured out what she was feeling. It’s childish and adorable.”

“Considering what she was trying to do, I don’t think that’s the right way to put it…but I guess memories or no memories, your essence is the same, eh? You really are something, Natsuki.”

“I’m honored if you enjoyed the show.” Subaru winked at Echidna.

“Hah.” Ram snorted derisively.

Subaru looked around the common room and then cocked his head.

“Huh? Julius isn’t here. Where’d he go? Toilet or something?”

“I am hurt that you think I would do something so trivial while you were going through something so important.” The voice had come from behind Subaru.

“I didn’t say it had to be little. Could’ve been the big one, too,” Subaru said with a nasty smirk as he turned around.

Julius had returned from outside the common room.

“Did you have stomach issues, Julius?” Emilia asked with real concern.

“I would suggest not taking his words too seriously, Lady Emilia. He is indeed your knight and someone you should be able to trust more than anyone, but at times, his remarks can also be rather intolerable…”

“Hey, quit saying stuff like that to Emilia-chan. Besides, you’re the one who wasn’t here. You can’t complain.”

“…Ha.”

He stared at Subaru with his yellow eyes for a moment, before his expression relaxed. Rather than a real laugh, Julius basically just breathed a little harder than usual. It was pompous and suited him

perfectly, but it also strangely didn't feel quite right to Subaru.

"If you will allow me an excuse, then I would say I simply stepped out on watch. If Miss Meili's ability is to be considered, the greatest threat would be the demon beasts outside the tower. However…"

Julius glanced at the young girl. Meili pouted uncomfortably, and seeing that, Julius smiled wryly.

"It's safe to assume she will not be a problem, yes?"

"Yeah, it's fine. She's not going to try killing me again at the drop of a hat. The question of whether she'll *never* do it again will come down to how well we give her a good example to follow. So no pathetic performances."

"I see. So it's a matter of putting on a show? In that case, please leave it to me."

Quickly guessing the result of the talk with Meili, Julius quietly nodded.

The way Julius put it didn't exactly sound great, but when it came to setting an example for others, Julius was probably the best person for the job.

The current Subaru couldn't claim to know Julius well, but judging from his refined manners, it was clear that wasn't just the man's natural temperament. Rather, his bearing was something he'd had ingrained through hard work and diligence.

"I've got high expectations, Mr. Knight. You and I are the only ones who can be father figures to her right now."

"…Humph. In that case, I shall do my best."

As they shared a bit of banter, Subaru carefully gauged the reactions, testing whether he had found the right level of intimacy.

—This was their fifth meeting since he had lost his memory.

Subaru had not enjoyed many peaceful moments during that time, but originally, the time Subaru Natsuki spent with all of them had seemingly been tranquil and happy.

In a deliberate attempt to not depart too much from that and to keep everyone from feeling too down, Subaru was trying to follow the original Subaru Natsuki's trail as closely as possible.

—He wanted to return Subaru Natsuki back to them.

"—Subaru? Are you okay? Can you talk more now?" Emilia peered into his eyes, looking worried.

"Whoa?!"

Subaru stumbled back in surprise at the sudden proximity.

“Ah…” Emilia gasped softly. “…It feels like, since you woke up…no, since you said you lost your memories, haven’t you been getting surprised by me a lot? Am I that strange? Is there something on my face?”

“No, um, not at all. Just cute eyes and a cute nose and cute lips and cute ears.”

“Cute…ha-ha, thank you. But then…why?”

“I think it’s because your cuteness isn’t just the sum of the parts. It’s exponential. And your voice, too. And your hair. Yeah, this isn’t helpful. You’re like an angel. It’s too dazzling, I can’t look too closely.” Subaru covered his face and peeked out at her from between his fingers.

Beatrice immediately reacted to that.

“—Argh! Could you say that in a more Subaru sort of way?!”

“Huh?! Um, what?!”

“What you said before about Emilia being an angel. Say that in a more Subaru way.”

“What kind of punishment is this?! No! It’s embarrassing! You’re adorable like an angel, too, Beatrice! Don’t pout!”

“It’s true that Betty is an adorable angel, but that’s not it…”

Beatrice’s shoulders slumped in disappointment. Patting her head, Subaru and everyone else gathered to start their meeting.

He had been through this discussion in the common room several times now, but it was a problem that none of them had been productive. He really wanted to make some progress for once.

“I’m happy to announce that Meili’s on our roster again. Now that she’s a full team member and because it’d be good for her social studies, I’d like to get out of this sandy tower fast. Thoughts?”

“It strains credulity to believe you’ve lost your memories when you say things like that… But in this grave situation, Barusu’s memory loss is a lesser problem. Though still a problem.” Ram started the discussion.

“Mm-hmm. Memories aren’t something that normally disappear without warning, so we need to do something to get them back,” Emilia said.

“About that… Can we put that aside for now?” When Subaru put the brakes on that idea, everyone around the circle looked surprised. “I feel bad for forgetting wherever I set my memories down, and I’m seriously happy that you all want to help me. But no one really thinks my memory loss is entirely unrelated to this

tower's traps, right?"

"You can't be so sure of that, Master. You lost your memory hitting your head on a toilet before, after all."

"No comments from the peanut gallery! I can't ignore that comment, but save it for later!" Subaru got annoyed at the wildly unexpected interruption. "Anyway! What I want to say is, there's gotta be a connection between me losing my memories and the tower. In other words…"

"In other words," Echidna said, continuing his line of thought, "if we fulfill the conditions to clear the tower, we will naturally find out why you lost your memory, or maybe even find out how to fix it. Is that what you mean?"

"Yeah, exactly. That's it!" Subaru nodded.

Julius put his hand to his chin.

"I see. If it was a trap of the tower that robbed you of your memory, then advancing through the tower will bring us closer to the answer. Or we will discover the reason you lost your memory might have been from coming too close to the answer."

"It's certainly possible. There's the solution to Taygeta, too. Maybe Natsuki getting too far ahead of us because of knowledge only he had is what caused him to lose his memory."

"Wait, wait, wait. You're definitely overestimating me there. I'm just a shut-in. My special skills are being able to neatly make my bed and maybe a bit of sewing?"

"Ah, look Subaru. You made this. Do you remember? Cute, isn't it? It's Puck," Emilia chimed in.

"Hmm, that's definitely a cute cat. But I don't really recognize it."

The conversation rapidly took several hard turns, but after hearing Subaru's response, Emilia disappointedly caressed the embroidered pattern on her outfit.

Is that her cat?

It didn't seem to have been brought on this trip, so Subaru wanted to hurry up and settle things here so Emilia could see her cat again.

There was also the possibility…

"Barusu might have discovered something he shouldn't have, and as a result of his rashness, his memory was stolen…that is certainly a believable story."

"It feels like there's a barb in the way you phrased that, but

Betty is broadly in agreement. Also, regarding Subaru's idea of prioritizing the clearing of this tower…It's not ideal, but there is a logic to it, I suppose."

"Beatrice…"

Beatrice was unhappy that recovering Subaru's memory wasn't a top priority. He appreciated that, but he had a major reason why he couldn't just put himself first.

They wouldn't make it in time to prevent the tragedy that would happen if they took too long trying to cure his amnesia. *I—no, all of us need to prepare for that disaster.*

"Of course, it's not like I want to stay like this forever. But I think, effectively speaking, the sooner we clear this tower, the sooner everything else is likely to be resolved, too. I want to do what needs to be done."

He was doing his best to keep the downsides of not having the old Subaru Natsuki here from showing. In exchange, he asked all of them for their help.

Everyone was silent for a moment, but then…

"—You really are stupid."

…Ram shook her head with a sigh and then looked around at everyone with her pink eyes.

"Even without his memory, that unfortunate head of his remains. So even if he got his memory back, the value of his contribution would only be marginally different from what it is now…in which case, it would be a waste to prioritize his memory. We should advance through the tower and hope that it returns along the way."

"There's gotta be a better way to put that." Subaru moaned.

"There isn't. You lost your memories while trying to clear the tower, didn't you? Then pick them up again along the way, too. Don't make it my problem."

Subaru had promised her. He'd remember, and he'd get everything back.

It was probably an understatement to say she must have had mixed feelings when he suggested not prioritizing his memory. But it was because of his promise that Ram had been able to say that so confidently…even though Subaru apparently broke his word all the time.

"It's not like we have any positive means of getting his memory back. I agree with Natsuki and Ram. And it's a bit optimistic, but

there is the chance that his memories come back with time, too."

"I suppose I am in agreement by process of elimination. It is not the highest priority. Clearing the tower should be our current mission. However, if we find a way to recover your memories, I will prioritize it then. Lady Emilia and Lady Beatrice should not have to be saddened so."

Subaru nodded deeply at Echidna's and Julius's answers. When he looked over at Emilia and Beatrice, they hesitated a moment, but —

"It hurts, but I'll be patient. But…"

"But?"

"Let me worry most about you sometimes."

"Ugh…sorry…"

Realizing he had effectively asked them to stop worrying about him until later, he lowered his head apologetically to Emilia.

Beatrice sighed, watching them.

"Emilia said what Betty wanted to say. That should have been most effective, so make sure you reflect on it."

"Yeah, understood."

With permission from everyone, they firmed up the plan to focus on the tower's puzzles again.

And with that, Subaru raised the first proposal.

"—Can we try looking for Reid's book in Taygeta?"

6

—Let's try to find Reid's book in Taygeta.

That was Subaru's suggestion for the immediate problem in front of them: how to clear the second floor.

"…His book? …But we don't have an inkling how?"

"Ha-ha, good one, Emilia-chan."

"Subaru!"

Emilia's cute cheeks flushed in anger at Subaru's reaction. While still reveling in how adorable she could be, Subaru looked at the rest of the group.

"I think Reid's book of the dead is probably going to be the fastest guide for how to clear the second floor. What do you think?"

"I asked this before, but how?" Emilia cocked her head. "I'm not against searching for a book. But we don't know how to search for it. And…"

"…Is Reid Astrea's book really in that archive?" Julius finished the thought.

Having drawn everyone's gaze, Julius turned his eyes, framed by long eyelashes, upward. As if looking through to the second floor beyond the ceiling.

"It's difficult to believe, but Reid Astrea, the great hero whose name was engraved in history, is waiting on the second floor for us to take on the challenge he has termed an examination. Reid Astrea is a man who lived four hundred years ago, and yet there is no doubt that the person waiting above is that very same person… But now there is reason to question his death."

"Seeing how lively he is makes you question whether he actually died, right? I hadn't really thought about that, but it's a good question…"

In truth, the reason Subaru assumed he'd died was because of what they had said. If he hadn't known the man's backstory, he would never have believed that Reid was dead. He was brimming with way too much vitality for that. No dead guy was that energetic.

"I think it's safe to ignore that line of thought. I can't imagine anyone could live for hundreds of years, so he should just be dead. Right, Beatrice?"

"You cannot be so sure, I suppose. Despite appearances, Betty is four hundred years old."

"And I'm around one hundred, I think?" Emilia said, chiming in.

"Same here. Considering when I came into being, I'm probably around four hundred years old? Though I haven't been awake that long," Echidna offered.

"Me too! Me too, Master! I've been waiting in vain for four hundred years! I was so lonely! I demand four hundred years' worth of hugs!"

"That's an awful lot of super-long-lived characters?! And you too, Emilia-chan?!"

He had been looking for confirmation, but what he got instead was an unexpected series of contradictions. He had not expected half the party to be centenarians. He had to mentally reset the group's average age by more than a few decades. But in a way, it also made sense.

"R-right. Emilia-chan is a half-elf…that also explains her

peerless beauty. Half-elves being long-lived and beautiful is a standard trope."

"Umm, y-yeah… Are you not scared of half-elves without your memory?"

"I guess if we're talking scary, then you *are* scary cute. Looks like that could kill for real. If I saw you with my guard down while waking up, I might go blind forever. Even now, my eyes are watering."

"Mrgh…dummy…"

Emilia's cheeks turned just a little bit red as she got mad at Subaru. The mood was starting to get a little weird, so he warned himself not to misunderstand her kindness.

Be still, my heart. Well, you don't have to, I guess, but…

"Ha…on the other hand, you're more of a relief, Beatrice. Like coming home for the holidays."

"That's not very satisfying…but you're patting Betty's head, so I'll let it pass."

His heart, which was racing because of Emilia, calmed down as he patted Beatrice. And she seemed satisfied with it, too, so two birds with one stone.

"If you don't mind," Echidna said while raising her hand. "I can understand Julius's concern, but I'm going to go out on a limb and say Reid is dead. That's just my impression from interacting with him, though."

"Based on what?"

"First of all, like Natsuki said, I can't imagine Reid Astrea is that long-lived a creature. He is definitely someone who defies logic in many ways, but he's still a human. And second, his personality."

"Personality? Like how he was *really* lively?"

"More uninhibited than lively. Maybe it's just me, but I can't imagine him patiently waiting here in this tower for four hundred years. I have to assume he'd be gone in three days," Echidna said with a shrug.

Subaru and Emilia both understood what she meant. Judging by everyone's reaction, that was a persuasive observation.

"Again, that's just my impression of the man. Is that convincing enough for you, Julius?"

"I cannot help but agree. In truth, considering the way he behaves, he is not the sort of person who would be satisfied remaining in any one place for long. If there were a reason why he

must remain here nonetheless, then it would be that the current him is bound to the tower's examination…would be my guess."

"He's bound to the tower, huh."

Subaru remembered the final scenes of the last loop as he listened to Echidna and Julius explain their theories.

Reid Astrea walking freely around the tower during the chaos, doing as he pleased. That didn't feel like someone whose freedom was restricted. In fact, if it were not for his one lingering regret, he would definitely have just cheerfully walked away from the tower.

The reason he didn't is…

"—? What is it? Something about me?"

"No…"

"Humph. I believe I still have eyes, ears, a nose, and a mouth on my face, but is there something abnormal?" Julius asked.

"Yeah, unlike Emilia-chan, you aren't cute, so you don't make the cut. But anyway…" Subaru turned the conversation back to Reid's book. "So, if we're all on the same page about him being a lively dead guy, then let's get back to the topic. Taygeta is filled with books of the dead, right?"

"At present, that is our understanding," Ram answered. "Those who read them experience the memories of the dead person… That much was confirmed by you and Julius. Unfortunately, you seem to have forgotten it, though."

"I said I'm sorry already, so don't keep holding a grudge over it. Anyway, that's the focus here."

Snapping his fingers, he pointed at Ram. Apparently not liking the gesture, Ram grabbed his fingers and twisted, giving him a sharp taste of pain.

Meanwhile, Beatrice softly raised her voice.

"Ah. So that's what you mean!"

"You understand what he wants to say, Beatrice?" Emilia asked.

"Betty does. Ah, so that's it. In other words, Subaru wants to use Reid's book of the dead to reveal the best way to defeat him."

"That's right." Subaru nodded while shaking his aching fingers.

"Ohhh." Emilia's purple eyes widened.

—They could use the book of the dead to figure out how to fight the legend.

Put simply, each person's book of the dead contained their memories of their life, but it could also be thought of as a strategy guide explaining in detail how they died.

And as a veteran of death who had already been through it four times, Subaru knew firsthand it wasn't easy to avoid the cause of your death.

"So, if we read his book of the dead, we can find out exactly how he died. It's a great tool for solving his puzzle. In a roundabout sense, that might even be why the books of the dead are here."

"I…hadn't considered that." Echidna's eyes widened. "But now that you mention it, that is true. A dead person was intentionally set as the examiner, after all. It wouldn't be strange if that was why Taygeta exists."

"I mean, you don't have to take it that seriously…"

When Echidna seemed more impressed than he expected, Subaru smiled awkwardly. It was one of those situations where it was hard to say if this was the intended path or a loophole.

"But one thing I can say for sure…whether it's the old me or the me here and now: This is a plan I absolutely want to try."

"…That makes sense, I suppose. There is no way you wouldn't find this sort of loophole."

"An unorthodox back door, rather than coming from the front. That is certainly something Barusu would try. I can believe it, too."

"Mm-hmm. Subaru is *really* good at that sort of flimflam."

"That's a word you don't hear much nowadays…" Subaru scratched his cheek a bit at their unwavering evaluation of the man named Subaru Natsuki, when Emilia's eyes suddenly glimmered.

"—!"

He was surprised by how strong her reaction seemed to be, but she immediately pinched her cheek.

"Ugh, nope, nope. The person who's struggling the most right now is Subaru. I have to get ahold of myself…"

"Lady Emilia, I understand how you must be feeling, but your cheek is getting red."

Taking Emilia's hand, Ram cautioned her.

For a while now, Emilia and Beatrice had been having some weirdly extreme reactions, but that was probably because they were sensing traces of the Subaru Natsuki they knew and loved.

Meili put her hand to her mouth when she heard what Subaru was thinking.

"…Right, last night, I saw you with lots of books spread out around you in Taygeta. Was that why?"

"Yesterday, huh…? Incidentally, could you tell how many

books I read?”

“Ummm…I don’t know that much. Sorry.”

Sitting on Shaula’s lap, Meili scratched her head and looked down.

“Don’t worry about it.” Subaru waved his hand.

Using not his, but *her* memories—Meili’s memory that he experienced from her book of the dead—he came to the same conclusion.

“Many books, you say…? I should like to hope not, but you won’t wind up saying you ran out of space for your own memories from reading too many books of the dead, will you?”

“I sincerely hope not, but I can’t say for sure. You know, since I forgot!”

Julius shook his head wearily as Subaru proudly pointed to himself.

He had gotten pretty used to being generally defiant, but he also didn’t actually doubt that his memory loss was connected to the books. That is why, if they did find Reid’s book of the dead, he believed it should be him, and not anyone else, who read it. He had lost his memory already, so it wouldn’t be too crushing if he lost it again—*Though I have too many important memories I can’t afford to lose now.*

“_____”

Everything that had happened in the last loop and everything that had happened before that loop, too. And the things he had decided in his heart during this loop. His promise to Ram, and his vow to Meili.

He had only repeated a day or so four times, and he was already carrying armfuls of memories he wouldn’t allow himself to forget.

That was why memories were precious.

They aren’t something you can afford to forget.

“—Anyway, if Reid’s as big a legend as you all say, then that’s perfect. Someone who’s that big a hero would have stories of his great feats and failures passed down through the generations. So his defeat is just the price of his fame… That’s a new kind of weakness, isn’t it?”

“…I understand Barusu’s aim. And I accept it. That doesn’t mean I do not have any concerns, though,” Ram said.

“It’s worth trying, at least,” Echidna agreed. “However, even

knowing that, I can't help but feel reluctant to take on that massive archive."

"That's…true…"

Subaru totally understood their concerns.

If Taygeta really did cover every dead person in this world, it wouldn't be hyperbolic to say there were as many books as there were stars in the sky. Singling out the one book they wanted was like looking for a needle in the desert.

But there was also a ray of hope. And the source of that hope was none other than Subaru's memory loss.

"If my guess is right, and reading books of the dead is what caused me to lose my memory…then that would mean I read someone's book of the dead."

"Umm…yes, it would. With the books there, if the name isn't someone you know, then for whatever reason, the information won't come into your head."

"…Barusu struck gold on a second book in that enormous library? Or possibly even more than that? That sort of luck…is impossible."

"Yeah, I don't think I'm that lucky, either!"

Considering everything he had been through, his spring of luck must have finally run dry. Or maybe he had used it all up with meeting them in this world.

"Either way, it wasn't luck. Which would mean maybe I devised some kind of system. If we could figure that out, it would speed up searching for any books we want."

"…What then? Given your current condition, even if we found a book of the dead with a name we know…," Echidna admonished.

"I know. Reid is the priority here, and everything else comes second… But there are other books we would want to see if we knew how to find them."

Subaru glanced at Meili. When she heard that, her lips trembled slightly.

"Mister, are you…?"

"I told you. I'm going to do everything in my power to raise you right. I'm not one to talk, but you're really bad about asking for what you want."

"_____"

Meili poked her fingers together and blushed.

Unfortunately for her, she couldn't really hide things from

Subaru. The whole reason she had seen Subaru in Taygeta last night was because she had been looking for a book of the dead there herself.

Finding the book she wants is just a little side quest.

"You're really, really, really mean… Petra must be blind."

"I keep hearing that name, but you're really letting her have it…"

He couldn't say whether it was just awkward embarrassment on Meili's part or genuine insults, but either way, it was a cute, childish sort of resistance.

Interpreting Meili's lack of objection as tacit agreement, he added a new goal to the Taygeta quest list and—

"I want to be clear here. I think we should go up to the Taygeta archive. Reading Reid's book of the dead is the best thing we can do."

"It's ironic that Natsuki losing his memory would provide a basis for action. I can't really see what sort of plan this actually entails, but only a fool makes excuses before trying."

"Yes! Subaru's right. If that's what we need to get through this tower, then let's do it!"

Echidna and Emilia both stood. Drawn by them, Beatrice and Ram, Meili and Shaula also rose. Subaru clapped his knees and stood and looked at Julius, who was slow to move.

"What is it? Do you have an objection?"

"…No, we do not have any other solution. I acknowledge your proposal makes sense."

"But you still have reservations?"

"…This is merely my own problem. Pay it no heed."

Slowly shaking his head, Julius stood.

Being told not to worry made it impossible for Subaru to actually not worry about it, so he felt more than a little concerned, but…

"I'll save it for later. Also, book of the dead aside, how famous is Reid anyway? He seems like a wild dude."

"For having lost your memories, it seems a lot has remained. I guess he left a strong impression… Reid Astrea is one of the three great heroes who defeated the Witch."

"Sage Shaula, Holy Dragon Volcanica, and Sword Saint Reid…"

"Not me. Master's the Sage."

"By your logic, I'm a few hundred years old, too? I spent way

too long between leaving the convenience store and waking up this morning…"

Taking Shaula's words with a pinch—or perhaps a mountain—of salt, Subaru delved a bit more into the legend of Reid. Emilia and the others glanced at Julius. Noticing their intent, he touched his bangs.

"There is not enough time to go through all the legends that Reid Astrea left in various lands. The most famous are…the battle where he slayed one hundred dragons and his record of six thousand victories and no defeats in the arena on Gladiator Island. There are also odder ones, such as how he is said to have defeated a being called a demon god in a drinking competition."

"They all sound really absurd, but having seen him…"

"It feels like they are not exaggerations. Indeed. Knowing his strength as I do, he is undoubtedly…no."

"—?"

"To the best of my knowledge, most of his stories tell of his unreasonable achievements. I do not recall any records of his personality or of any normal, human sorts of failures or defeats."

Brushing his hair aside, Julius concluded his impressive display of knowledge.

Subaru shuddered just a little bit at the fact that even the records said the man had never lost. It would make sense if the stories of his defeats simply hadn't survived into the modern day, but what if he really never lost?

Subaru trembled at the thought of an entire life without ever experiencing defeat and at the fact that it seemed entirely possible if it was Reid.

"And with that, we made it."

As the conversation dropped, they reached the room containing the stairway to Taygeta.

Up those stairs, an archive filled with books of the dead awaited them, but…

"—Ram, could I leave everyone else to you for a moment? I want to talk with Julius for a moment."

"With Julius?"

Ram furrowed her brow at Subaru's request.

Julius was surprised as well, but for the moment, he didn't say anything. Ram's pink eyes narrowed, peering into Subaru's black eyes. After a brief moment, she sighed.

“Do not take too long. If we’ve all lost our memory like you by the time you make it up, it’ll be too late.”

“Don’t say scary things like that. I wouldn’t mind seeing if you were more gentle and refined after losing your memory, but…”

“I have no intention of forgetting anything else.”

“…Yeah. If you find a weird book, don’t get too close to it.”

Ram shrugged and led the rest of the group up the stairs.

He was reasonably confident that he could leave things in her capable hands. In that sense, he trusted Ram the most out of everyone in the party.

“Natsuki.”

The women followed Ram’s lead up the stairs to the next floor. Echidna, at the tail, called out to Subaru after putting her foot on the first step. Her blue-green eyes wavered slightly.

“Be gentle.”

With that, she slowly started up the stairs, too. Watching her leave, Subaru scratched his head.

She probably figured out why I kept Julius back.

When the two of them were alone at the bottom of the stairs, Julius broke the silence.

“So, what did you wish to discuss? If you have gone so far to distance Lady Emilia and the others, it must be quite pressing.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Subaru answered evasively.

“That is a rather inarticulate response.”

“What I want to say is difficult to put in words. That’s all.”

Subaru made a mess of his black hair as Julius stood in front of him, back to the stairs.

The main reason for calling Julius out and leaving the others to search for the book was because there was clearly a way to take down Reid Astrea.

—During the end of the last loop, when it turned into a free-for-all in the tower, Reid’s one lingering regret was wanting a fight with Julius.

But Subaru couldn’t understand the reason. From what he had heard, Julius had fought Reid once before and been almost immediately defeated. *I can get a loser fixating on the person who beat them, but the opposite is…*

“Subaru?”

“Ah. What do you think of Reid? Do you like him?”

“…Is there a meaning in that question?”

“No, just a jab to lighten the mood. My real question is a little different. —Put it this way.” Subaru closed one eye. “Do you think you can win against Reid?”

“—!”

Julius’s yellow eyes widened. Seeing the unmistakable agitation in his gaze, Subaru took a short breath. On the one hand, this reaction was expected, but on the other, it also made him want to go *Give me a break*.

“Setting aside whether you recognize it yourself or not…it’s understandable that you might feel scared in a situation like this. Once you get a habit of losing, it’s hard to break it.”

“Subaru, what are you…?”

“Sorry. If I’m being honest, I think it would be best to take as long as possible to get you back on your feet again. I do. But we don’t have the time. You understand, right?”

Julius’s expression stiffened, and he caught his breath.

“We don’t have the time” has a different meaning for me than for him. But even so, we should feel this same sort of impatience. Or rather, Subaru had been forced to understand it.

It was something that the old Subaru Natsuki couldn’t have said out of concern for a man who was hurt and had not noticed his own unease.

—This Subaru Natsuki would do what the other Subaru Natsuki could not.

“I’ll be blunt, Julius. Because right now, I’m invincible.”

“Invincible…that’s a rather bold statement.”

“Nothing is holding me back, so I can make a big leap. I can’t keep watching you shrinking back when you look at me, when you look at Echidna, when you talk about Reid. I’m the type who can’t let things go, either, so I’m not one to talk, but ignoring all that for the moment, I’ll be blunt.”

“—I’m listening.”

Taking a deep breath, Julius adjusted his posture and looked right at Subaru.

Meeting his gaze head-on, Subaru continued.

“That is one thing, and this is another.”

Subaru spread his hands to the left and right.

“—What?”

Julius looked taken aback by his brazen statement.

“I get why you feel awkward when you look at me. The me up

to today probably did something to you. Whatever he did hasn't disappeared from the world, but it has disappeared from my head."

"I…yes. That much is true. However, I…"

"Hear me out. Because of that, you and me, we're going to have to build our relationship up from the beginning again. At least you and the current me have to do that. Forget past me for now."

Julius couldn't recover from the wave of turmoil that had swallowed him up, and that blunt reasoning wasn't doing it for him.

It was a terribly forced logic. Subaru was decidedly not conveying all of what he wanted to say.

In truth, he was using the old Subaru Natsuki's achievements and taking advantage of the influence they gave him over Emilia, Beatrice, Julius, and the rest of the party. Right now, he was asking for permission to use the good part of that influence and ignore the bad part.

Because—

"You're the strongest person in our party. So you're the one who's going to have to duke it out with Reid. Even if we do find the strategy guide, we're going to have to count on you for the actual fighting."

Of course, part of it was that Reid had some sort of fixation with Julius and wanted to go at it with him. But even without that, Subaru had no intention of yielding on this point. Considering how Emilia had already made it through, there was no one else who could do it other than Julius.

"I can understand being scared. I can understand being bewildered. And I'm really sorry for whatever the past me did. But with all that in mind…I need you to focus up and fight."

"…I have already lost to him twice."

"I know. But win the next match."

That was one more loss than Subaru had known about. But it didn't matter anymore. It was just one more thing in the pile.

"The calculation gets messed up if you don't win. I thought of a lot of different matchups in my head, but us guys have to do whatever we can before asking the girls to fight. That would be a disgrace for a knight."

Subaru clenched his fist and held it out.

"—A disgrace. The current me is…a disgrace of a knight…," Julius murmured softly, lowering his gaze.

Subaru had hit him with a stunning, bewildering, hurtful, gut-

punching logic that grabbed Julius by the chest and shook him, leaving him adrift.

And at the end of it all, Julius's mask of elegance cracked…

"As Ms. Ram said, it is difficult to believe that you have really lost your memories. Or are you just pretending to have lost your memory in order to encourage me after I lost my nerve?"

"At the cost of darkening Emilia-chan's smile? Dumbass. I wouldn't do something that roundabout! Besides, even if I didn't do that, you wouldn't run away. You'd fight for everyone."

"That is…contradictory. You were just trying to steel my timid heart."

"No. It's not that. What you're missing isn't courage. You've got the courage right there." Subaru took a step forward, pressing his fist against Julius's chest. "What's missing is determination. The will not to lose."

Julius took a sharp breath.

"_____"

Subaru wasn't lying.

He had seen it in the last loop. Julius had held on to his sword, even in that desperate situation with demon beasts and Reid all around him, entrusting things to Subaru without averting his eyes to the despair in front of him.

There was no other way to interpret that line except as him saying "Leave this place to me."

He had said it in the direst of moments.

Leave Reid Astrea to me.

And that was the last of him Subaru saw.

So…

"…I didn't see the end. And I don't remember what happened before today. So I haven't once seen you lose to Reid."

Julius Juukulius had not lost. This knight, this man had never once lost in front of this Subaru Natsuki. So no matter what anyone else might say, Subaru Natsuki wouldn't entrust this fight to anyone else. He would continue to expect Julius Juukulius to defeat Reid Astrea.

"I'm leaving Reid Astrea to you. You defeat the most dangerous enemy. In exchange, I…in my own way, I'll do my best to take care of everything else."

"_____"

"I can't hear you, Julius. Answer your pal's expectations."

Subaru's fist hit Julius's chest again. The last time was for entrusting his expectations, this time it was for hammering home a powerful hope.

Julius touched his chest and let out a long, deep sigh.

"…How can you have such high expectations of me, if you've forgotten everything before today?"

"It's…your image. The impression you give off. The way you look and talk and carry yourself. The things you have and your clothes, the way you eat and walk. Just the overall effect of everything."

Unable to talk about what had happened during the last loop, Subaru clutched his own chest and struggled to answer.

By chance, Subaru and Julius both held a hand to their chests as they faced each other. Julius kept his hand on his chest while straightening his back and slowly bending at the waist.

It was a beautiful, natural bow, like a knight in a story.

"Impression, huh?"

"Y-yeah. The way you look, everything about you makes me feel that way."

"I see… My appearance made you think that."

Julius's tone shifted as his head remained bowed.

Thus far, his tone had sounded like he had been forced to face something tender to the touch, but now just a faint trace of vitality returned. Some flexibility and warmth had taken root.

That was the impression Subaru had as Julius raised his head and looked forward.

And…

"Forgotten by the world, unable to confirm the existence of my own master, and then forgotten even by you, the only one who remembered me…I have been unsure of where I stand. However, even in this state, I have not lost everything that I strove for. That's what you are saying."

"I didn't come close to being that classy, but that's the gist of it."

Julius had taken Subaru's clumsy, not fully coherent words and given them a polished, intelligent form.

Subaru had thought he wouldn't be able to convey 100 percent of what he wanted to say, but it felt like Julius had managed to come surprisingly close.

"It's a bit abstract and kind of heavy on gut instinct, but it felt

like the problem was a mental one, so I guess it worked?"

"Ha. Why are you timid now? Weren't you supposed to be invincible?"

"I mean even after you grab the star, you'll still die if you fall in a hole…"

Julius furrowed his brow at that indecipherable explanation, but he didn't probe it further. When it came to that, from his interaction with the Subaru Natsuki of yesterday, he seemed to have an understanding that meaningless jokes could be ignored. What a weird understanding.

Either way…

"Feeling a bit more positive?"

"That's hard to say. In essence, your words didn't offer any solid advice and were mostly an appeal to emotion. And it's not as though anything has changed dramatically."

"You…"

"However…" Julius's eyes narrowed as he looked at Subaru. And then his lips relaxed into a slight smile. "That is one thing, and this is another."

And he ended the conversation with a turn of phrase that was rather unlike him.

7

Honestly, he didn't have any confidence that he had managed to comfort Julius.

I can't help thinking there were better words, a better way to give him a push. Something better than "that's one thing, and this is another." A more polished explanation or a way to overwrite the absurdity of the current situation…

"But it was very much something you'd say. For better and for worse."

"…Really? Then how close was it to what the old me would've said? The answer is kind of a big deal for my current identity…"

"When it comes to establishing one's own sense of self, I was quite shaken not too long ago as well. As someone with some experience in a similar sort of predicament, allow me to offer a bit of advice. That is one thing, and this is another."

"Oh, come on!"

Snapping at Julius, who was quick to put those words to use,

Subaru headed up the stairs to rejoin Emilia and the others in Taygeta.

He had said it to Julius, too, but they were on the clock. They needed to lay down the foundations for victory before disaster struck the Pleiades Watchtower. And when it came to the essentials, finding Reid's book of the dead would be a struggle for sure, since they were looking for a single book in an ocean of—

"Ah! Subaru! Look! We found Reid's book!"

"Eh?! Really?!"

Having reached the third floor ready to dive into a massive task, he felt his resolve completely fall apart the moment he heard Emilia's glowing report. She was pointing to the thick book Ram had cradled in her arms. If that really was the book they were after, it was truly impressive they managed to find it in this overflowing archive.

"And while I was counseling Julius? What are you, speedrunners?"

"I don't know what that is, but it's amazing. Tell her what a good job she did."

Emilia proudly thrust out her chest while also indicating it wasn't her achievement. Subaru wondered who he should be complimenting, but the answer was clear soon enough. Emilia gently pushed forward the dark blue–haired girl clinging to her hips.

"Meili found it. Isn't that sterling?"

"That's a phrase you don't hear too much nowadays…but setting that aside. You found it, Meili?! That's definitely a huge achievement! You did great!"

Subaru praised the unexpectedly meritorious searcher. However, she pouted and looked away from them.

"I-it's nothing special. I just happened to spot the book, is all. I don't think it's anything to get excited about, when I just found it a little fast."

"Don't be silly. You should be proud! You did great, Meili. Good job canceling out the blunder you made trying to push me off the stairs!"

"You're calling us even after just that?!"

Meili's eyes peeled back in shock as Subaru roughly tousled her hair. She didn't appreciate how he was messing up her hair and shouted in protest, but his expression softened.

“Still, though…you can say what you want, but you must have done your best. There’s no way you would find the book we’re after that easily if you weren’t.”

“—Ngh, m-mister, don’t say pointless things like that.” Meili’s face turned red.

“What do you mean? This is super important.” Subaru smiled. “It’s proof that you’re one of us. But if you’re saying that you found it at random…”

“Unfortunately, we haven’t figured out any pattern to how the books are arranged in the Taygeta archive,” Echidna chimed in.

If their stumbling across this book was pure chance, then Subaru’s side quest would have to remain pending. *For now, we’ll just have to keep advancing the main quest…*

“You don’t have to worry that much.”

Guessing what Subaru was thinking, Meili gave a casual shrug. That was something he hadn’t seen in a while. It felt like she was starting to return to normal.

“I won’t make any promises, since I know they’re not worth much, but I will make your wish come true.”

“You really can’t keep your word, mister. I’ll be waiting without getting my hopes up.”

A promise without saying as much. Seeing Meili smile, Subaru switched back to the main subject.

“—Got it… Then it’s safe to assume no one has looked at Reid’s book yet, right?”

The book Ram was holding had a bunch of letters on the spine that Subaru couldn’t read. But that didn’t change the fact that it was the prime suspect in the case of his missing memories. On that point, Ram was seemingly in agreement about approaching it with caution as she touched the spine.

“Considering your current state, it would be a problem to get ahead of ourselves and have another person lose their memory, so I haven’t let anyone read it.”

“I should point out we still haven’t confirmed that the book is what caused me to lose my memories.”

“Ha!”

Even if he didn’t find it convincing himself, Subaru still puckered his lips a little at having his statement laughed off like that.

“Anyway…” Beatrice turned her distinctive patterned eyes to

the book Ram was holding. “We managed to find what we were looking for. Next is deciding how to use it, I suppose.”

Tension filled the air, quickly replacing the joy of finding the book. If they messed up, they could lose their memories. It was a lot like saying “Here, drink this suspicious, unlabeled elixir.” It was suicidal, no matter how many lives you had to waste.

“Let’s talk about what we can speculate about the potential dangers.”

“…Is there really anything you can figure out, Echidna?”

“Something. Though all we have to work with is what happened and fragmentary information.” Echidna shrugged.

She held her hand up and raised her finger.

“First of all, the danger of the books of the dead… That one is simple. As Natsuki’s situation indicates, there is a possibility of losing your own memories. From what he’s said, the memory loss is partial…though in this case, it might be more precise to say what memories remain are fragmentary.”

Since what was lost was greater than what remained, that was indeed the clearer way of putting it. But it was also slightly misaligned with reality. The claim of fragmentary amnesia was just Subaru’s excuse to hide what he’d learned from Return by Death. The truth was that at the start of the first loop, he had lost all his memory in the truest sense—or more precisely, he had forgotten everything from the moment he first came to this world.

Based on that, it was better to assume there was no limit to how much could be lost. In fact, given the full spectrum of possibilities, maybe Subaru had been rather fortunate, since he had retained his sense of self.

The idea that he might’ve lost everything that made him an individual sent chills up Subaru’s spine. But at the same time, the question of why he had not lost his memories from his original world also reared its head.

“It doesn’t seem likely that memory loss is simply the price for reading the books of the dead. That is speculation based on the fact that Julius read a book just like Natsuki but has not shown any similar symptoms.”

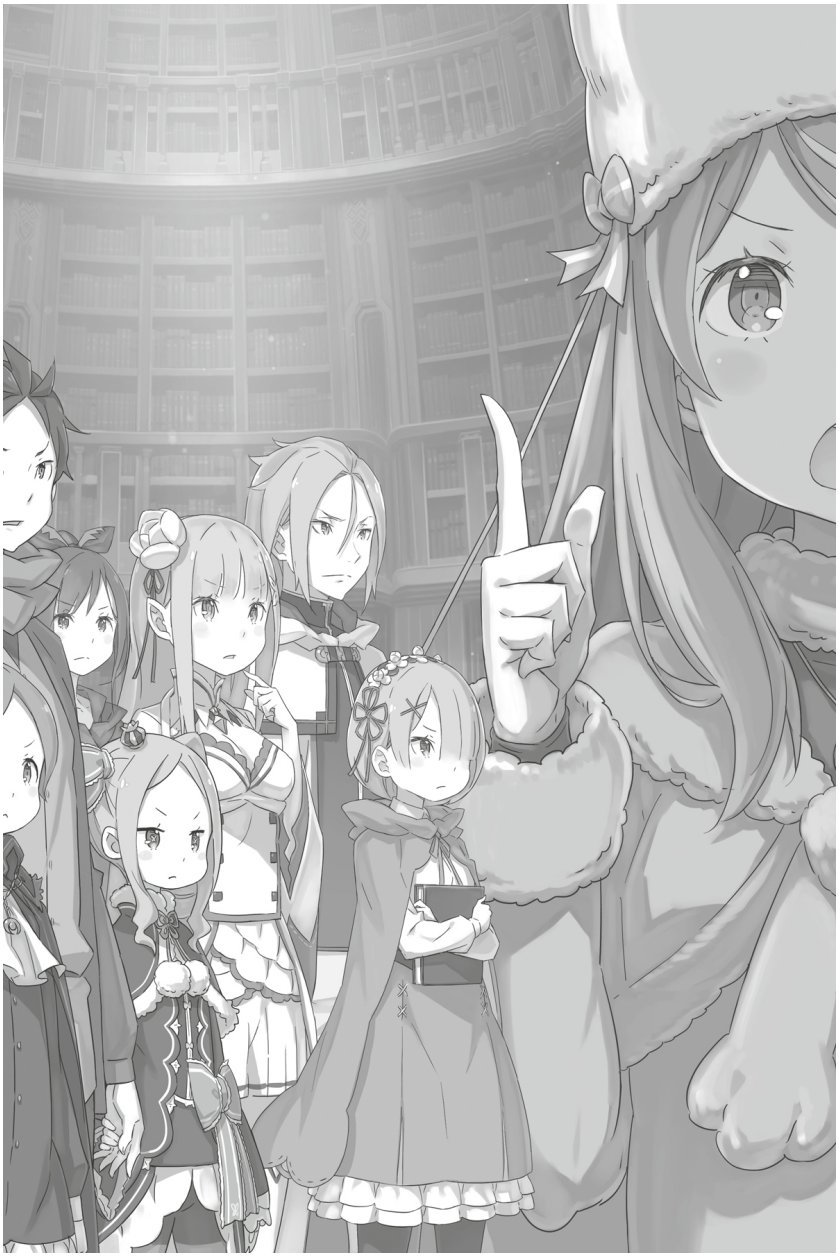
“…I do not wish to think about it, but there is a possibility of minor memory loss. It is possible the degree of loss is related to how much was read, I suppose,” Beatrice objected.

“Agreed,” Julius responded. “In other words, the difference

between my and Subaru's situation could be the difference in the number of books we've read…which also matches what Miss Meili witnessed him doing last night."

"_____"

Carefully following the wiser party members' discussion, Subaru nodded at that theory.



“In other words, the number of books you read is what determines the memory loss?”

“That’s merely a possibility. If that theory is correct, it would suggest that one of us who hasn’t read a book of the dead should be the one to tackle Reid’s. It might be dangerous for Natsuki or Julius, who have already read books of the dead.”

One theory suggested that people who’d read the books before shouldn’t read any more, and the other theory suggested the opposite. Both sides were based in solid logic, and it was hard to see a significant flaw in either one. But what stuck out to Subaru was…

“Then what does that mean for me if I’ve lost my memory already? If the memory loss is tied to an overload of information from books of the dead, then did I get reset? Or not?”

“That’s a grave question. If you lose your memories again, we’ll have to explain everything to you again… The thought alone is horrifying,” Ram said.

“Seriously, that’s what you’re worried about?! It’s horrifying to me too, but come on!”

“Hmm… I’m *really* worried about that, too. I don’t want Subaru to forget so many things again.”

Ram and Emilia both affirmed Subaru’s concern, from different angles. But it was still just conjecture, and they didn’t know the truth yet. They didn’t have an answer to whether it was more or less dangerous for those with a greed for knowledge.

Subaru couldn’t really say it out loud, but he had the memory of reading Meili’s book of the dead in the last loop, too. Would that count as another reading this time as well?

“…What? You look like you’re thinking about having me read it to make up for what I did— Owww.”

“Of course not. Don’t say something so stupid, Meili. I’ll smack you.”

“This is abuse. Your treatment of prisoners is even worse than back at the manor.”

Subaru scolded the girl for saying something that shouldn’t be joked about. Meili’s cheeks puffed out, and she grabbed Emilia’s and Shaula’s hands and hid behind the two of them.

“Sheesh, talk about being quick to switch sides… So, anyone

have any other thoughts?"

"The choices are one of us with no experience but one book more of leeway than Julius, Julius who has experience, or else Natsuki, who has maybe been overwhelmed from reading too many ones already…" Echidna listed the options.

"I'm gonna say something really selfish, but…I think it would be best if I was the one to read it."

"Subaru…"

Beatrice grabbed Subaru's hand as he said that. Her eyes were more concerned than uneasy as Subaru winked at her.

"This isn't the time for jokes. Your memory is…"

"Of course I don't want to lose my memory. But from a risk management perspective, this is the right choice. No matter how you look at it, if someone has to lose their memory, then it should be me, to keep the damage to a minimum. And I'm the weakest one here, too."

He didn't think he was weaker than Meili, but it had already been proved in practice that he couldn't win against anyone else. He could be easily restrained, and he would have lost his memories, so it would be easy to deal with him.

The problem was that he had started accumulating new memories he couldn't afford to forget, during the past four loops.

"I don't intend to lose my memories. But we're a team. Everyone has to do what they can for the sake of everyone else."

"_____"

"Julius is handling fighting, Echidna's the brain, Ram's got the sharp tongue, Meili is cute, and so is Beatrice, while Emilia-chan is obviously the beautiful heroine, and Shaula has the gravure scenes. That means this job is meant for me."

"I feel like there were a lot of pointless roles there…"

"That's not true at all! When the lights go out, it's important to have a sultry scene! I'll strip for Master's art!"

"No, I'm going to freak if you get any more naked than you already are, so you don't have to try so hard."

"I got left high and dry!"

Everyone present understood that this was just Subaru's way of working through things. And the first one who decided to let him have his way was Beatrice, who was still holding his hand.

She heaved a sigh and stared at Subaru…

"Once you get stubborn like this, there is no changing your

mind. In that sense, you aren't any different even after losing your memory. Though I already learned that from the incident with Meili, I suppose."

"Hee-hee, but you still love me anyway, right? You're making me blush."

"Don't get ahead of yourself!"

Beatrice's face reddened, and she slapped him on the hip. But she didn't seem to disagree with him. And everyone else seemed to feel the same way.

"If you forget your promise, I will pulverize you."

"What was that for?! I just finished a nice little monologue!"

"What indeed."

Ram snorted and pushed the book she was holding into Subaru's arms. Feeling the heavy tome in his hands, Subaru gave a strained laugh.

"Even if I ask you not to do anything reckless, you still do it anyway… That is *really* unfair. I'm always worrying."

"I can't really say anything except I'm sorry. But I worry about you just as much as you worry about me… Or is it a little too presumptuous to say that?"

"I appreciate you feeling that way. But it gives me *really* mixed feelings. Make sure you come back…but no promises. If you made a promise, you would definitely break it."

"I'm actually kind of curious now how untrustworthy past me was. What did I do?"

Shrugging at Emilia's cheering words, Subaru looked around at everyone. But as he did, everyone looked away. Apparently, he was a terrible repeat offender.

Either way, though…

"Is there any objection to me reading it?"

"…In the end, all of our guesses are just speculation. I wanted to pick the choice that was least likely to be dangerous to everyone here, but…"

Echidna's eyebrows drooped apologetically as Subaru hefted the book. There was no doubting that she meant what she said. Subaru simply told her not to worry about it.

"All right, I'll get to it. If my memories go, freeze me in ice and give me a serious talking to."

"Who would do something so violent, I wonder?"

"I know you wouldn't. Because you're nice."

Patting Beatrice's head as she regarded him with open concern, Subaru poked her big forehead. Beatrice pouted unhappily and then took a step back.

Gathering everyone's attention, Subaru plunked himself down on the ground, crossed his legs, and took a deep breath.

Reid Astrea's book of the dead was on his lap.

"_____"

It did feel almost ominous. This was similar to when he read Meili's book of the dead, but the pressure coming from this book was even greater.

The feeling really does change, depending on whose book you pick up, huh? What sort of life am I going to experience?

…And can my memory handle it?

"_____"

Putting his hand on the cover, Subaru glanced up at the people watching him.

Beatrice, Meili, Ram, Echidna, Julius, and Shaula were all watching.

And…

"—Subaru."

"All right, I'll be back. I might be out a while, so you can have dinner without me."

"…Dummy…"

With Emilia's smile seeing him off, he opened the book.

In an instant, the characters written on the page floated up, and it felt almost like the information was passing through his eyes and slamming into his brain. And in the span of an instant, he was pulled into the book—

—His consciousness cut away from the archive to darkness.

8

—The feeling he'd had when he read Meili's book of the dead was fairly vague.

The scenes he saw and the life she had lived were vivid, but his memory as the person watching those scenes felt very much like he was becoming the same person as the person whose name graced the book. He thought from their perspective and experienced their emotions.

Long story short, the journey through the contents of the book

of the dead was like merging with the subject.

In that instant, tracing those contents, Subaru Natsuki *was* Meili Portroute.

And that was part of the reason why *she* sat at the edge of his consciousness, the odd fragment of consciousness that assumed the shadow of Meili.

If that was the effect of the book of the dead, then what Subaru was seeing in this moment was Reid Astrea's life, and should have been his first-person view of the world, as difficult to understand and comprehend as his thoughts were.

What did he think, what did he like, what did he dislike, what did he love, what did he hate, what did he achieve?

He should have become one with Reid Astrea's mind and been shown his life.

And so Subaru immediately noticed something unusual.

—The place he found himself in was clearly not Reid's past.

"…Huh?"

He was standing in a bright, bright white place.

The surroundings were a vast, endless white void. He had no idea where he might be.

He could see his arms. His legs. Bending his neck, he could see his torso and waist, too.

Meaning he had a body. From that alone, things were already different from what had happened when he read Meili's book. The experiences were not matching up, and he realized that he had been dropped into a new unknown situation.

From what he could see, his clothes were exactly what he had been wearing in the archive.

Was that because his mind registered that as his present form, or because of some other intent, like the will of the book's spirit taking direct action, recreating him in this form?

I don't want to think I was physically absorbed into the book when I started reading, but…

"—Ohhh? You came again, mister?"

"—!"

Subaru jumped, hearing a voice besides his own.

It came from behind, so he reflexively jumped forward, rolling

once before spinning around. The eyes of the person behind him shot open at his sudden movement.

"You're…?"

Subaru couldn't hide the surprise and confusion in his voice.

It was someone completely unexpected, entirely beyond what he had imagined—an encounter with someone he didn't recognize at all.

A girl he had never seen before was standing there in front of him.

Beautiful pale blond hair, almost like gossamer threads, that was unbelievably long. It spread across the white floor, gathering in a pool of gold at her feet.

Big, round, blue eyes and limbs the color of delicate bone china. She was wearing a plain white dress, and everything about her gave off the feeling of translucence.

"_____"

A girl he had never seen before. That was how it should be.

But his eyes narrowed upon seeing her. He rubbed his eyes furiously with the back of his hands, as if trying to clean fogged glasses, but she didn't look any different.

Even when he checked again, he didn't know her. He felt faintly as if his memory was aching, though.

"Have you calmed down some, mister?"

"Where is this…? No, wait, who are you? Which should I start with?"

"Greedy, aren't you, mister? But we don't dislike the way you come right out and say what you want to ask. We love greedy people."

Her lips cracked into a sneering grin that bewildered Subaru. There was no other way to describe that smile.

She looked maybe thirteen or fourteen, if that. With her neat appearance, a regular smile would've suited her nicely.

But in Subaru's eyes, her expression was sinister. His instincts seemed to be telling him that she had trampled on countless lives.

As Subaru shuddered, the girl spoke.

"This is the lonely, white end of the line for souls. The cradle, Odo Ragna. The corridors of memory."

"Corridors of…memory…?"

"Yep, yep. And…"

Subaru's eyes widened at that unfamiliar term. And satisfied

with his reaction, the girl spoke. The girl who was a walking bundle of malice spoke with a sneer.

"—And we are Louis Arneb, the Witch Cult's Sin Archbishop of Gluttony."

"_____"

"It will just be for a short while again, but it's nice to meet you, mister."

CHAPTER 3

—STAND UP

1

The corridors of memory. And Louis Arneb. That was what the blond girl said.

"_____"

Subaru fell silent.

A white void that flew in the face of every expectation, and a completely unexpected encounter. To top it all off, the girl had a knowing look about her face, and she appeared willing to discuss several things, but…

"…Witch cult, gluttony, sin archbishop… What is all that mumbo jumbo supposed to be?"

"Aha."

Louis covered her face and broke into a laugh as Subaru crossed his arms and cocked his head. On that point alone, it almost felt like a painting—a girl standing against an illusory blank canvas. But Subaru's instincts were screaming out in alarm.

He was born and raised in peaceful, modern-day Japan, so the girl's existence had to be something very different for his survival instincts to react like this. The only problem was that the title she had given meant nothing to him…

"…The Witch Cult, put simply, is like a gathering of outcasts hated by this world."

"Oh?"

"Even you've heard about the Witch of Jealousy before, right? The Witch Cult is deeply connected with that great person… Well, you can think of them like her worshippers."

"…So then that archbishop bit is…?"

Sin and *archbishop* seemed like words that were very much at odds, but they seemed to click together in his mind. The first thought he had was…

"You can tell right away that's a villain's title."

"No way, shut up, nuh-uh, nope, never, not on your life."

Shaking her head, Louis hugged her slender body. However, there was no sign of the creepy smile leaving her face, and she didn't really seem to be denying it, either.

I can't read what she's really after… Or no, it's more that I can't really pin her down.

"Don't bully a poor, innocent girl like that, mister. We can be hurt, too, you know. Our heart is more tender and fragile than the average person's."

"Color me unconvinced. And is that royal 'we' supposed to be some kind of unique character trait? Or are you just trying to sound cool, like some one-kid army? Try to keep it straight."

"Ah…don't worry about that. There are just a few too many egos, it's a little vague which one gets to be in charge. We're pretty fed up with it, though."

Louis looked down slightly.

"But it is what it is. They're gifts from dear brother and brother dearest. We'd be a failure of a little sister not to accept them. Siblings have to help each other out."

"…A cute sister who cares about her big brothers. As an only child, I'm a little jealous."

"Really? But you might have a younger brother or sister by now?"

"Whoa, that's a scary thought! I'd rather not imagine that!"

His parents got along well and were happily married, so something like that might not be a joke. *Considering the two of them, with me gone, they might start on another kid… Nah, there's no way.*

"_____"

If Subaru disappeared, his parents would keep searching until they found him.

So he prayed instead for this summoning to another world thing to be a rebirth.

If his parents were going to have to experience the pain of forever searching for their lost son, then he would rather have died before being reborn in a new world. That would be far better.

Picking up her hair that spilled across the floor in both hands,

Louis looked up at Subaru.

"I understand, mister."

"—! Yeah, as if!"

He erupted.

Peering into his eyes, acting like she understood the unease that Subaru wouldn't put into words. It was infuriating. He turned away as he shouted at her.

"What do you know about me?! Talking out of your ass…"

"You feel guilty for your mom and dad, right? You regret being a bad son who couldn't even say good-bye to them. No, you always regretted it. Now, and before, too, right?"

"_____"

Continuing like she knew exactly what he was feeling, Louis gently hugged Subaru from behind.

Her body was small, light. Subaru stopped breathing and froze. Not because she was hugging him, but because of what she was saying. She acted like she knew everything, and her words were surprisingly accurate.

"How do we know? Of course we know. After all, there isn't anyone who understands you as well as we do, mister."

"—Don't touch me!"

"Ahh."

Louis pouted as Subaru brushed her away and took some distance with a ragged breath.

What the hell is going on? Do women in this world just not have any hesitation about physical contact? Everyone gets too close. Gets too friendly.

Am I scared I might actually surrender my heart to that touch? That warmth?

"What are you?! What do you want to say?!"

"We just wanted you to have some peace of mind, mister. It's okay. It's okay. You managed to reach a resolution about your feelings toward your parents. It might have been one-sided, but you felt like you had faced up to it. It felt like a weight was lifted. At least, on the surface."

Sneering the entire time, Louis used the fingernails of her right hand to claw at her left arm. She started scratching wildly, so violently that it was painful to watch. Subaru's brow furrowed, but Louis stuck out her long, oddly bright red tongue.

"On the surface, it's completely wholesome. No one can tell you

aren't feeling aaaanything in your heart. You're skilled, mister. And that's what's so sad."

Subaru's lips twisted as her words tore at his heart. His instinct was screaming that he shouldn't indulge her any further.

"I don't know what you are trying to say. What I do know is that you're going to hurt yourself if you keep that up, so stop it. And a conversation is supposed to be a game of catch. No major league fastballs. Stick to easy throws."

"Both of us?"

"Both of us. For example…let's get back to that archbishop thing from before."

Not willing to let her dictate the flow of conversation anymore, Subaru shifted the topic back a step.

Archbishop and *gluttony*. That at least rang a bell for Subaru.

"If you're supposed to represent *glutton*, then there should be six more people like you, right?"

"If you count dear brother and brother dearest, it should be exactly six, probably? Ah, but it went down by two recently, so maybe four. Two of them can just die already."

"…From the sound of it, there's not much comradery."

"Obvious, isn't it? We're called Archbishops, but in the end, we're still a gathering of outcasts. The titles are different, but we're the same as the Witch."

Louis knelt down, burying herself in her blond hair. Careful not to step on any of it, Subaru sat down cross-legged on the ground in front of her.

"Witch? Together with the Witch who's supposed to be super scary?"

"The Witch of Jealousy is even nastier than us, so we don't really want to be lumped in with her, though. The others are the same. The Witch and the Archbishops, they're different titles, but the same thing. Good-for-nothings compatible with the Witch Factors, just called different things in different times and places."

"_____"

"Well, you've forgotten about the Witch and Archbishops and us now, so maybe it doesn't matter to you. We get it. We understand. We do. We get it, we get it, but, because we get it, because we want to get it…"

"Gimme a break."

"Ahh."

Stopping her swelling wave of words, Subaru put his hand on his chin.

At the very least, it felt like he was hearing something really important, even if it wasn't really clicking for him. The problem was this situation just didn't feel real. An empty white space, a girl standing there… He was getting hit by a strong sense of déjà vu…

"Are you, like, some kind of god or something?"

"God…ah, this? Like some kind of reborn in another world thing? That doesn't make much sense to us, but we don't have anything to do with that. Though it is the sort of place that can make you feel weird."

Laughing with another sneer, the girl spun around while sitting on a cushion of her blond hair, gesturing to the empty white expanse around them with her fluttering hair.

"As you can see, this is a place where eeeeverything disappears, so it's completely empty. And there is one person all alone here, so it looks like a guardian deity."

"Cradle of Odo Ragna, was it? Like corridors of memory, that's another name that I can't make heads or tails of."

"Mmm-mmm-hmmm, right…? Long story short, this is the place where souls are filtered."

"Souls get…filtered?"

That was a phrase he had not heard before, and a question mark popped over his head. *Filter* wasn't a verb he had ever heard anyone use when talking about souls.

But Louis cheerfully pulled her knees to her chest.

"Yeah, yeah. After using a rag, you wash it and dry it and then use it again, right? Souls are the same. Brush off the dirt and use them again once they're clean."

"And that dirt on them…is that supposed to be memories and experiences or something?"

"If that's easier for you to understand, then sure. Call it whatever you want."

Louis's cheeks twisted as she stuck out her tongue.

Subaru spun his head, looking all around. It was still just a white space—there was nothing new to see in the corridors of memory. There was no obvious evidence of what Louis was talking about in the endless white void.

"It's not that simple a thing to understand."

"This Odo Ragna god thing seems pretty nasty."

“It’s nothing like what you’d call a god. It doesn’t have any special thoughts or ideas. It’s just a mechanism. A mechanism so the world doesn’t break.”

“A mechanism…?”

“Witch Factors, blessings, the Sword Saint, the Witch—it doesn’t see any of that. If there’s anything good about it, it’s that it doesn’t care at all. Everything is equal and fair and unbiased.”

Half closing her eyes in boredom, Louis wedged her face between her knees. Glancing sidelong at her face warped by her white kneecaps, Subaru let out a small breath.

She had been pretty open thus far. It was likely that she had not told any real sort of lie. Which is all the more reason why he sighed.

Exhaled, inhaled, exhaled one more time, and then looked at her. And asked the question.

“—Are you the one who stole my memories from before today?”

“That’s right.”

The criminal answered the question disappointingly easily.

2

“_____”

Subaru shut his eyes when the response came so readily.

He had not really expected her to deny it. Even with this short back-and-forth, he had a feeling that she wasn’t the type to be roundabout.

Louis knew too much. She knew too much of the depths of Subaru’s feelings. Louis Arneb was too familiar with the old Subaru Natsuki, knowing things that even the current Subaru Natsuki couldn’t know.

Meaning…

“—So the old me really did come here.”

“To be precise, you came by a slightly different path. But the goal was the same. The result was just a little bit different is all. But amazing. Wonderful. How many times did it take for you to get here?”

“_____”

“C’mon, answer, mister. We answered you, didn’t we? How many times is this after we ate you, mister?”

A chill ran down Subaru's spine. Her eyes, her question… Someone would only ask those if they knew about his Return by Death.

No…of course she does. Obviously.

If she had stolen the original Subaru Natsuki's memories and she could freely inspect them, then it would be weirder for her not to know.

That ability wasn't some power he had gained after losing his memories; it must have been an ability that Subaru Natsuki had possessed even before losing his memories.

I'm sure he used this to get through lots of pinches. That's why Emilia and Beatrice and the others trust him so much. All that trust is evidence of cheating.

Subaru wasn't going to call foul. Cheat or not, he didn't believe there should be any hesitation when someone's life was on the line. Subaru Natsuki's choice to use that ability was correct.

He acknowledged that value and grasped the power of Return by Death.

However, alongside that resolve, on the other side of the coin, Subaru felt uneasy. A worry had burrowed deep in his heart. And Louis Arneb had touched on that fear, that taboo.

"—Are you worried that someone else knows? Well, it's too late, mister. Since we met you yesterday, didn't we?"

"_____"

"If the rule was that no one could know, you already broke it. But what happens in the corridors of memory can't easily escape to the outside world. So the scary, scary Witch won't do anything."

Her hands and legs still on the ground, Louis leaned in close to Subaru. She had a bewitching smile, at odds with her childlike appearance, her red tongue flicking out of her lips.

"So mister, how many times has it been?"

Her voice felt like a tongue licking directly against his brain, and he experienced a numbing sort of ache.

Barely moving his lips, he finally answered.

"…The fifth."

"—! Amazing, wow, so cool, isn't it, it is, because it's amazing, because we want it… Eat it all! Gluttony!"

"Gah!"

"We want to taste you so much, until our stomach bursts! From our experience, appetite and libido are similar. And that's the same

as love, right? So we—”

Louis pushed Subaru down and straddled him, her face contorted with excitement as she breathed hard. With flushed cheeks and rapt eyes, she ran her tongue over Subaru’s neck without hesitation.

As that happened, he could imagine what she had been about to say—

“—I love you.”

As he remembered those words of love whispered in his ear countless times in the last loop, when he had wished for death in that hopeless situation, his heart burst.

“—Don’t…touch me, you wannabe femme fatale!”

“—Ah.”

Opening his eyes wide, Subaru grabbed her neck and violently pushed her to the floor. Trading places, now he was straddling her.

Her body was slender and light. Her blond hair spread across the floor made it look almost like he was pushing her down onto a bed of gold as he grabbed her by the throat with teeth bared.

“Let your guard down? Too bad! I have the upper hand now! If you don’t want to be strangled, then give me my memories—!”

“Give them back? If we don’t, you’ll wring our neck? Us? A delicate little girl?”

Even with his hand around her neck, the excitement in her eyes had not faded at all. Her lips softened as she looked at Subaru, who was breathing heavily, nose flared.

And as her expression relaxed, she spoke, her voice like a hex ringing in his ears.

“Can you really do that, mister?”

“—Do you think I can’t?”

“More like ‘know’ than ‘think.’ After all, right now, we know you better than you do.”

Louis poked both of her cheeks with a finger and cocked her head provocatively. Gulping, Subaru looked down at his right hand around her neck.

I just have to squeeze a little to show I’m serious. If I prove I’m serious, she’ll change her tune. Think of Emilia, Beatrice, Ram, Meili, Julius, Echidna, Shaula, Patlash, everyone, and—

“—Your grip loosened, mister.”

“_____”

“We really weren’t going to resist, you know? After all, here,

we're just the delicate little girl we look like. Unlike our brothers, we can't do anything without taking the form of someone we ate."

Louis poked Subaru's hand. That weak nudge was enough to make Subaru's hand slip abruptly off her neck.

"Damn it…ghh!"

"No need to feel bad, mister. You did good. You did good. Honestly, we didn't even think you would be able to make it back here."

"Is that supposed to be some consolation?"

Louis was still lying where he had pushed her down, acting unconcerned, as if any danger had already passed. Anything Subaru said would just sound like sour grapes, but Louis simply stuck out her tongue and laughed.

"But this is for the best, isn't it? If you got Subaru Natsuki's memories back, the current you would die, after all. This way, it ends without something stupid like suicide."

"…Huh?"

"Oh? That's a strange reaction. Did you really not realize? If those memories come back, the current you will be overwritten, and your existence would be erased… That's the same as dying, right?"

Subaru froze at Louis's matter-of-fact riddle-like answer.

Die. Disappear. Having it said so bluntly…

Being told that the moment Subaru Natsuki's memories returned, the current Subaru's consciousness would be overwritten.

If you asked me whether that was dying or not…

"—Right now, Subaru Natsuki is dead. He doesn't exist anywhere. But if he comes back, then this time, you will die, mister. *You* won't exist anywhere."

"_____"

"Is there much value in getting Subaru Natsuki back? You can do the same things, can't you, mister? You like the people around you just like him now, don't you? And they will like you just the same, too. What's so bad about that?"

"What's…?"

So bad? When put like that, there was nothing bad about it at all.

That Subaru Natsuki and this Subaru Natsuki. Neither of them was bad.

Subaru was a person with lots of flaws. Just crap tons of them. Enough to make him hate himself. If anyone asked who he hated

most in the world, he wouldn't hesitate to say himself.

That was how pathetic, how lacking Subaru Natsuki was.

But when it came to this one problem, he had not done anything wrong. If there was anything wrong, it was that there could be only one winner in this cruel game of musical chairs.

"Emilia-chan and the others… I wanted to…"

…Give Subaru Natsuki back to them.

That was why he had intended to steel his resolve to get those memories back, to not hesitate if he was ever given the chance. But he had averted his eyes from the fact that his existence would completely disappear. He had hoped for some sort of miracle, a convenient blending of their two memories. That the current Subaru would remain somewhere inside Subaru Natsuki.

That had been his vague hope, but…

"It's hard to say what'll happen. We've never seen anyone who got their memory back, so we don't know."

Louis grinned at Subaru's obvious inner turmoil, her eyes making her look just like a cat toying with a mouse.

The criminal who stole those memories was insolently claiming she had no idea what came after. And it was almost surely the truth. Louis Arneb wasn't someone who would ever give back what she had stolen to its rightful owner. So she didn't know what would happen to Subaru Natsuki after his memories came back.

"You were given life, mister. It would be a waste not to enjoy it."

The irresponsible thief continued, peering into Subaru's face from close up.

"Because we ate Subaru Natsuki's memories, you're here now. So that makes us almost like your mother. Choosing your own death, right to your mother's face? Isn't that disrespecting your parents, mister?"

"Bullshit…"

"—Memories make the man, mister."

Louis's face went blank, and her voice was low, cold. That alone was spoken seriously.

Subaru caught his breath at the unexpectedly sharp words and fell silent. At the same time, he felt like he had heard that line before. The ring of it, the words. He had heard it right before his second loop's death…

"The current you has the relationships that the current you

made. Why not try again. Live a positive life. That's another option, if you ask us."

"_____"

"Also, maybe we shouldn't say it, but…Subaru Natsuki doesn't seem like the greatest guy."

Closing an eye, she made a face like she was speaking a difficult truth while pummeling Subaru's emotions.

Still lying on the ground beneath Subaru, she clasped her hands in front of her chest and looked into his black eyes with a dreamy, maiden-like gaze…

"Poor Emilia! Born just like the Witch of old, a pitiful girl avoided by everyone! Ahhh, but I'm so kind for being willing to be with her!"

"Wha…?"

"Weak and fragile Beatrice! Living alone without anyone to rely on, what a lonely girl! I have to take her by the hand and lead her down the dark and dangerous road!"

To Subaru's shock, she spoke the names of the girls who had prayed for his safety and watched him go…and then she started reciting terribly twisted thoughts.

It was obvious who Louis was implying thought these things. He could tell, but…

"Rem, so devoted, offering unconditional love! So foolish and beautiful and so pure. An incomplete child who feels alive when she becomes desperate, for the sake of someone other than herself. That is why I have to guide her!"

"What…what are you getting at?!"

"Just sharing what Subaru Natsuki thought. What he wanted was a feeling of superiority. He was never thinking about someone else. He was just drunk on the pleasure of having useful people waiting on him. And puppies who refuse to get close don't get fed. Those people got pushed away."

"_____"

"Do you really want to give yourself up for the sake of that Subaru Natsuki?"

She asked it again.

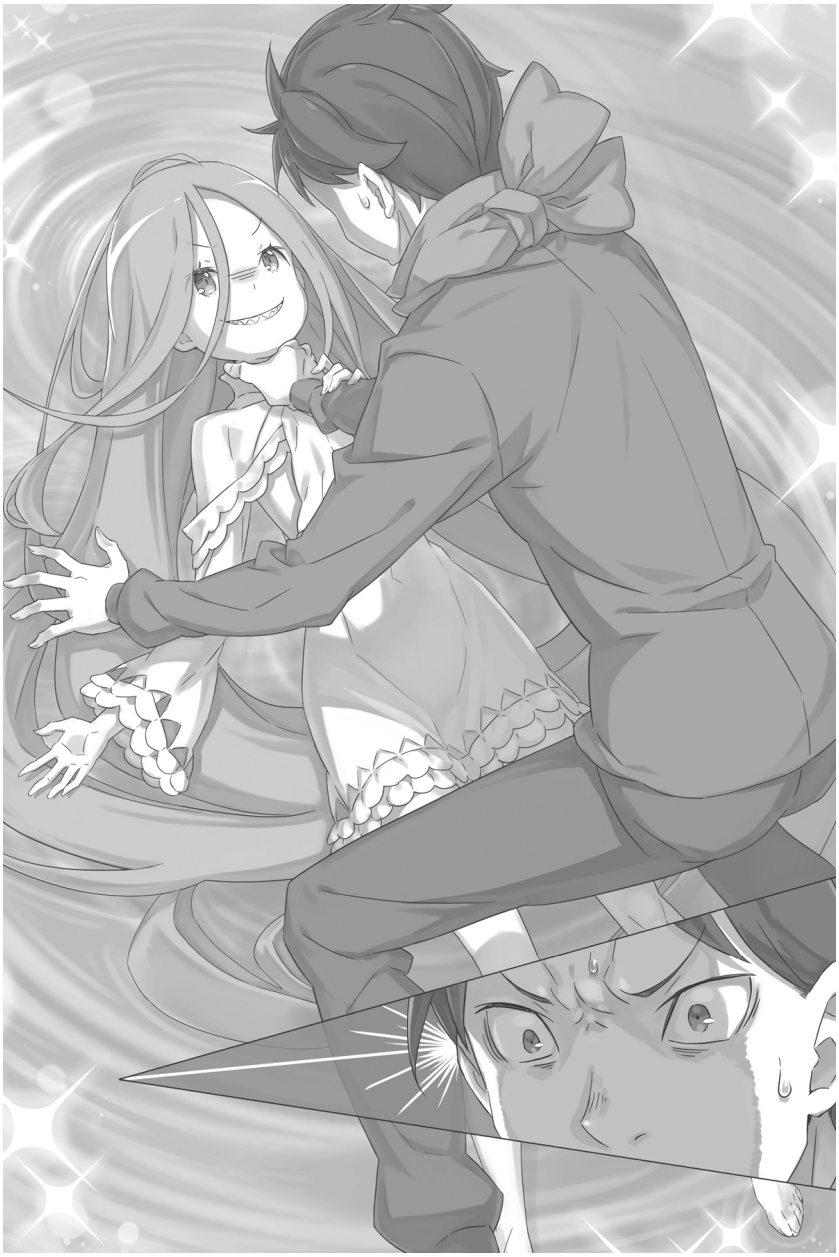
Louis was… Gluttony was demanding a confession from Subaru Natsuki. She wanted to hear what Subaru really felt: Do you want to die or not? And if you do want to die, would you really die for someone like that?

—Would Subaru Natsuki really choose death for the sake of some other Subaru Natsuki?

“So what do you want, mister?”

“—!”

Louis’s slender arm grabbed Subaru’s and put his hand on her neck. She even guided his fingers around her neck. All he had to do was squeeze, and her slender neck would snap.



She had just concluded he couldn't do it. But that would be the same as killing Subaru Natsuki. At the very least, that was what she was saying.

"So."

"_____"

"Well? What is it? Which one? What'll it be? What do you want? How do you want it? What can you do? What happens next? What's okay? We'll forgive you, whatever you pick."

Louis's voice hammered his ears mockingly, sneeringly, like a curse.

Louis Arneb, the Archbishop of Gluttony, the slender girl, the loathsome being, the parent who created him, put the question to the Subaru Natsuki before her.

—What would he do about Subaru Natsuki?

"So…"

So.

"What do you want, mister?"

3

—The cruel, cruel choice ate away at Subaru Natsuki.

He could feel something in his heart burning to a cinder.

His humanity, his trust in himself, his feelings about Subaru Natsuki as a separate person, something was being scorched away.

With his hand on the neck of the girl he had pushed down, with her sneering up at him, Subaru Natsuki was placed at a crossroads. His own fate and the fate of Subaru Natsuki hung in the balance.

"_____"

I can't hear my heart. My breathing is ragged, but my lungs aren't working. Even though he was in such a desperate situation, there wasn't a bead of sweat on his brow.

That was surely because his physical manifestation there wasn't real.

My body was transported when I read the book; just my mind was pulled in…but all this is trying to avoid the reality in front of me, isn't it?

Subaru's heart was trying to achieve a fleeting peace by letting

his thoughts wander into the distance. But time, space, and the girl in front of him wouldn't let him escape.

"So what will you do, mister?"

The girl he was pinning down looked up at Subaru, who was still frozen in indecision. She peered into his black eyes with a sadistic sneer, and her tongue flicked back and forth, as if she was going to lick them.

"Pinning a delicate little girl down, your hand around her frail neck. Doesn't it give you a thrill? Or is it just something a guy with your sort of nature has plenty of experience with?"

"—!"

"You're trembling. How adorable. Will that let you make your important, important choice?"

Tilting her head, Louis kissed Subaru's wrist. That repulsive act, the intensity in her flirtatious gaze, and her callous words reminded Subaru of a scene.

It was a tragic scene he had experienced once before. —But that time, the perspective had been flipped. He had seen it from the perspective of the girl in front of him, not from his own eyes.

The scene of Subaru pushing him down. Being strangled while seeing that vicious look on his face.

Subaru Natsuki had strangled Meili…

"Ugh."

—The instant he realized how similar the situation was, Subaru's body, his face, everything tensed.

"—Oh, so you do remember something like this."

"Don't! Don't…!"

"We're not joking. If anything, you're the one who isn't being serious. You should seriously, earnestly love yourself."

"_____"

"Yeah, that's right. Love yourself. C'mon, do it. Just like the people you cherish want you to. You need to love yourself."

A torrent of superficial words in an insincere voice. Was she trying to make him understand something, or was she simply not capable of empathizing with people? Was she being artificial, or did it come naturally? Was she sneering at him or consoling him?

It was all ambiguous. Everything about Louis Arneb was ambiguous.

"You…if you're right, if that's true…give me proof."

"Proof?"

“Proof that the current me will disappear if I bring Subaru Natsuki back…!”

“There isn’t any. None. Zip. Zero. Nada. Nothing. Not a single thing. Nothing at all… Does that make you feel better?”

“_____”

“You’re going around in circles, mister. We can’t talk about things we don’t know. We don’t know if our brothers would die if what they ate was returned. And honestly, we’ve never returned something we ate, so we don’t know. We ate it, after all.”

Louis opened her mouth wide, revealing a red tongue and seriously sharp canines, letting Subaru see all the way to the back of her throat, as if to say *Look, there’s nothing there*.

Her red tongue dancing all the while she referred to stealing people’s memories and devouring them as “eating.”

“So what will you do, mister?”

“Gh…ngh…”

Dying was scary. Terrifying.

But it was a different sort of fear from what he had experienced four times before when he’d died and come back. The issue weighing on his soul now was the potential loss of self. His existence hung in the balance.

That was what death was originally supposed to be. If you died, your consciousness was lost, and there was no second chance. So maybe Subaru had no right to complain after relying on the easy choice that let him fix his mistakes. Maybe it was a supreme luxury to get to choose whether he would disappear or not.

But it was his life.

Placed in a position where he had to choose whether to snuff that candle or not, he felt his heart cracking with each passing second.

“_____”

Subaru had already died four times since coming to this world. They were all short.

Thrown into an unfamiliar world, surrounded by strangers, and then visited by death in some difficult-to-escape-from form.

Added together, the sum total of the time he had been conscious was less than two full days. It was a short, meager time. But in addition to those two days, he also had spent seventeen years in his original world.

It had not gone well. Subaru had been shit at life.

But even though it had not gone well, even though it had been trial and error, even though there had never been any situations with his life on the line, he had at least tried in his own way to put up a fight in the big moments.

If the original Subaru Natsuki came back, it wouldn't change the fact of everything that had happened. But his current self who cared about those moments would disappear.

The me who made that promise with Ram, who swore to protect Meili, who seared Echidna's forgiveness into my heart, who spurred Julius on to fight, who believes Beatrice is so lovely, who…who fell in love with Emilia…that me would disappear.

"I don't want that…"

That realization made Subaru's body crack.

Subaru's body there wasn't the real thing. And because it wasn't real, because it was a reflection of the feelings in his heart, Subaru's body shattered.

Fissures spread along his arms and legs. His cheek fell to the floor.

It was the fake shell of Subaru Natsuki that he'd been wearing.

As it fell to the ground, the strong facade he had been putting up peeled away, too.

"No, no, no…no…"

"Of course not. It's natural."

He shook his head like a child, rejecting the terror of death, not of loss that awaited him.

Why do I have to lose it? Why, when I just realized I love her?

"I don't want…"

"Mm-hmm. We understand. We get it. We know."

"I don't want it…"

"It's your life, after all. Why do you have to just give it to someone else?"

"Everyone…all of them…I want…"

I want to be with everyone longer.

He cared about them. Even though it had not been two days, even though he had suspected them multiple times, had tried to kill them, had tried to run away, had let his paranoia consume him.

Subaru cared about them. They were precious to him.

If he was with them, if they cared about him, he might be able to learn to like himself, too. That was what he had thought. He had actually felt some hope.

He had always felt negative about his life, but he had finally found a ray of sunlight.

So why did he have to let go of it himself?

That was…

"—I don't want to…"

"That's right. Of course not. So then, what do you think you should do?"

"…Stay myself…"

"Yes. Just be who you are, mister. That's right. You took it for yourself. It's a game of musical chairs. The one who takes the empty seat is the winner."

"_____"

"The one who gets pushed out steps down. Acknowledge it. Accept your own existence. Shout it to the skies. That you're the real one! Isn't that right?!"

Just below him, close enough so Subaru could feel her breath, Louis roared with eyes wide and blazing.

It almost seemed like she was about to bite him—no, she *had* bitten the wrist of his hand around her neck, warning him with a vibrant pain.

Looking into his wavering black eyes, Louis Arneb shouted.

"Acknowledge it! —Subaru Natsuki is just another person, just the stranger most familiar to you!"

With a roar, she demanded he reaffirm his existence. Demanded he not do something so stupid as die for someone else's sake.

Why did he have to sacrifice himself for someone else?

—And for someone who wasn't him, for some other person using his name. To never be able to meet the people he cared about again, just so that person could meet them.

To yield the time living with them, those precious, irreplaceable days.

Who would do such a stupid thing?

"So kill him! Kill him! Just kill him! If you kill him! If you just kill him! If you kill him dead!"

"…Subaru Natsuki."

"You are the only Subaru Natsuki in this world, not a replacement for anyone else."

"—!"

I'm the only Subaru Natsuki in this world, not a replacement for anyone else.

Earn the right to hold hands with Beatrice, to talk shit with Ram, to make Meili pout, to be taken aback by Shaula's openness, to shoot the breeze with Echidna, to stand back-to-back with Julius, to feel Patlash's unconditional love, and to be with Emilia.

If Subaru Natsuki had it, then Subaru would…

"_____"

His vision blurred.

His mind was directly influencing his body. His heartbeat, his aching lungs. He could feel them vividly now.

But what he felt most strongly was uncontrollable tears.

Was it rage or sadness, jealousy or envy, guilt or fear?

Subaru didn't know what emotion had caused it. He didn't know anything. But as the tears blurred his vision, he saw it.

"_____"

Someone was looking down at Subaru, at Louis.

Louis was lying on the ground, looking up at pathetic, teary-eyed Subaru, whose hand was still around her neck.

There was only one person Subaru could think of who would be there.

"…Get scared and decide to show yourself, *Subaru Natsuki*?"

"_____"

The blurry figure didn't say anything.

It just looked at Subaru. A blurry white figure standing on a white floor with a white world to its back.

Subaru's face was a mess as he let the truth spill out in front of the person who had suddenly appeared.

"I…I don't want to disappear. I don't want to die. So I…"

"_____"

"I want to be with everyone. I like everyone. So I…"

"_____"

"So I…"

He continued rambling, trying to justify himself.

Just like when he had put his hand on Louis's throat. He had come to the conclusion that he didn't want to lose himself. So he told the figure that had appeared before him.

Even if that meant killing the person in front of him with his same face. Because he was…because Subaru Natsuki was another person. Just a familiar, close, other person.

I have that right.

Subaru Natsuki would kill the other Subaru Natsuki and take

his place…

"I'm not you! We're…!"

Different. That was what he tried to say. He tried to cast aside the possibility.

But just as he was about to—

"…Who are you talking to, mister?"

Louis's eyes were wide, as if she was dumbfounded. She looked at him like he had completely lost the plot. She twisted her head, looking in the same direction as Subaru, trying to see what he was seeing. But her brow furrowed in doubt, and her sharp canines moved.

"No one's there, so who are you talking to, mister?"

"_____"

Louis looked like she couldn't believe what was happening. Her expression changed, looking like she was scared of something.

"This is our place… There shouldn't be anything that can disturb it. Talking to someone other than us here…stop it. You're…!"

Louis was imploring him, but Subaru's consciousness didn't budge.

All his attention was gathered on the figure still standing there, refusing to disappear. The wavering outline of the person in his bleary vision got just a tiny bit clearer.

A figure he didn't recognize.

As the outline gradually grew clearer, it looked to Subaru like they were smiling.

Shaking his head, blinking forcefully, he tried to see the smile more clearly—

"—Why are you trying to choose just one?"

A voice he had never heard. The voice of someone who should not be there. A blue-haired girl he had never seen smile before… was standing there smiling.

As Subaru fell silent, the girl, still smiling—

"Stand up!"

That was the first thing out of her mouth.

—She shouted at Subaru Natsuki in the world's strictest voice.

4

"Stand up!"

The voice hammered the shattered Subaru Natsuki. Those words pummeled and battered him. The merciless, unflinching shout cracked Subaru Natsuki, accelerating the shattering. It clawed at his bare heart without hesitation.

"Stand up!"

The blue-haired girl raised her voice at Subaru.

Glaring at him, she roared. Then she roared again. At Subaru Natsuki, who was still kneeling there, pinning the girl down, as cracks formed on his stunned face.

"Stand up!"

The same bellow.

Over and over again, it cruelly, unreservedly hammered Subaru's heart.

Why do I have to suffer this?

It hurts. It's painful. It's miserable. It's sad. My heart feels like it's going to break.

Having to suffer this sort of painful decision. You don't often get hit with one after the other with no time to prepare like this. —At least I managed to stop regretting being in this awful place.

I already gave my answer. Isn't that enough?

"Stand up!"

The girl in front of him refused to accept his complaints, his stubborn conclusion, his heart cowering in fear of loss, his shrinking back. She forcefully, steadfastly rejected it all.

I made a decision. You could just accept that. At least act like you're a little troubled. Isn't it fine? I've worried enough. So why are…?

"Stand up!"

Even as his heart broke, she refused to accept Subaru's decision.

"Stand up!"

Still?

Why is her voice, why is she…? Even though it hurts so much…

"Stand…! Stand! Stand! Stand up!"

Who is she? She's somewhere in my memory.

He had never talked to her before. She wasn't even in the current Subaru's memory. He didn't know who she was. Only what she looked like. That wasn't enough of a connection to make him stay his hand.

And yet.

Why? Why is my heart so hot? Why is there so much heat welling in my chest?

"Stand up, Subaru Natsuki! Stand up! My hero!"

His heart quivered as the tearful voice of a girl he couldn't remember yelled at him to be a hero.

Subaru's heart wavered even as he wanted to laugh at such a stupid story.

The cracks and fault lines accelerated.

It was Subaru Natsuki breaking free from the shell of Subaru Natsuki.

But what emerged was only slightly different from what had been there before.

—No, if anything is different, then it'll be starting now.

Swallowing his fearful heart, as the voice telling him to stand wished, he stood.

"If you can stand, then go. Go and save everything."

Everything as in what? What's everything?

It was too vague. What was everything?

"Everything is everything. Every single thing. Every single person. Yourself. And even the stranger most familiar to you, too!"

What is this?

Who can do that? Does she really think I can do that?

I don't have what it takes. I can't even save myself.

For the sake of the people he cared about, for the sake of the people who cared about him, for the people he wanted to hold dear, for the sake of his memories with them that he didn't want to lose.

I was about to let go of something just now. Do you really think I can?

"You can. After all…"

What?

Because of what?

Give me strength, give me an answer. If you can, then—

Please, blue-haired girl, tell—

"—You're my hero."

"_____"

Something fell with a thud in his chest.

A dark, stagnant thing. As if it was purified by her voice that sounded almost like a confession of love. —No, it wasn't *like* a confession of love. That's exactly what it was.

He had one more reason why he didn't want to give this place back to Subaru Natsuki.

"—Ha."

But that wasn't the only thing that increased.

Purified by her words, the dark, stagnant thing started to glow and change shape.

There was a pulse inside Subaru Natsuki, at his most covetous core.

"_____"

It pulsated. It lost everything, was left behind by everything. But even so, it wanted to hold everything down, not wanting to let a single thing slip from his fingers, not wanting to let go even of himself.

As he begged for that, his cowardly Greed bloomed into the strength to fulfill that wish.

—The fickle Factor connected with his being.

"Come, Cor Leonis."

The seed of Greed that had lost its place blossomed inside Subaru.

And as it took a more defined form—

“_____”

The blue-haired girl’s smile alone celebrated that moment.

5

“…Mister?”

“_____”

Louis spoke while watching Subaru stand.

His hand was no longer wrapped around her neck. Still looking bewildered, she sat up on her golden bed of hair, blinking in confusion.

“What…? C’mon, keep going…it’s not done, right?”

“_____”

“It’s not…”

“You don’t need to say anything else. I’m sick of your twisted explanations.”

I’m honestly surprised how clear my head is.

Because of that, he could also calmly acknowledge that this malice that had come in the shape of a girl had twisted his will. She had tried to use him as she pleased.

“_____”

Louis’s eyes narrowed. She couldn’t know the specifics of what had happened in Subaru’s body. Even Subaru didn’t really understand the specifics.

But an unwavering greed had settled Subaru Natsuki.

Subaru glanced not at Louis, but past her.

The girl who had mercilessly roared at him wasn’t there. She had disappeared the moment Subaru stood and faced forward.

But this is probably enough!

This wasn’t the place, and he wasn’t the one who should reunite with her.

No, that’s not right, either. But the one who should reunite with her is the Subaru Natsuki who has regained his memories of her, his feelings for her.

And there’s no reason to distinguish between that other Subaru Natsuki and this Subaru Natsuki.

“Even though I was told…time and time again.”

—They told me, even without my memory, I'm still Subaru.

His need to distinguish, to separate, to delineate, to differentiate. That was his burden, and the curse tying him down.

But what of it?

Now that he had settled on what he should do, it was a guide, a strand of hope. If he pulled that thread, it would lead him right to where his precious people were waiting at the other end.

"Put away the knife and fork you dine-and-dash asshole. I don't have any food for the likes of you."

Louis Arneb's eyes widened. Widened, and she looked at Subaru, who was pointing at her. Seeing that there was no trace of emotion on his face, she looked down.

"Ahh…"

She looked down and let out a raspy sigh.

It was a sigh filled with a difficult-to-describe emotion.

As she sat up, her shoulders trembled, and she pulled her knees close, curling up atop the carpet of her own blond hair.

And slowly she raised her face—

"—Argh, damn it, damn it, damn it. Just one step. Just one more step."

With loathing in her eyes, she glared at Subaru and cursed at him.

"Just one more step. It was so close. What went wrong? Who tricked you, mister?"

It was a voice steeped in a deep hatred, like someone in the depths of hell jealous of a person enjoying paradise on Earth.

"Just one more step and Subaru Natsuki would have been completely peeled away from *Subaru Natsuki*…!"

"…What? Why would—?"

"—Because we can't eat the same person twice, obviously!"

"—!"

Louis unleashed a bloodcurdling shout, drowning out Subaru's suspicious question. As she lifted herself off the ground, her expression changed completely. She glared at Subaru with a beast-like face devoid of any humanity.

"We had to separate them! The *Subaru Natsuki* we already ate once, and the leftover Subaru Natsuki. Even though we made all sorts of plans…it's all wasted! Go ahead and laugh!"

"…It's not funny. None of this is the least bit funny."

"Really? Really?! But you hate us, too, don't you? Isn't it fun

seeing the people you hate sad? It feels good, doesn't it? We were so bored of eating, but you…you could have satisfied us… You were the only one who could satisfy our gorging…!"

As Louis shouted with bloodshot eyes, Subaru murmured the last word.

Unless I misheard it, she said she was Gluttony, so where did Gorging come from?

As Subaru was confused, Louis looked up at the white sky and shouted.

"Gourmet Lye and Garbage Roy don't understand aaaanything! One after the other, endlessly eating without thinking… For my sake? For me locked up in here, who can't choose anything? Don't make me laugh, stupid brothers!"

Hugging her hair, Louis started flailing wildly in a spittle-flecked tantrum.

Subaru couldn't understand the meaning of everything she was shouting. The Lye and Roy part—those were probably names? But what he could tell from the reference to multiple gluttonies and memories was—

"You and your buddies…take people's names and memories…is that it? You steal all those things and eat them all. Right?"

Subaru, who'd had his memories eaten and lost who he was.

Julius, whose name had been eaten, and who'd experienced the grief of being forgotten by everyone around him.

And Rem, who had been both consumed and forgotten by the world and put into a deep, unending slumber.

All of them were the work of Gluttony, of Louis and the others, whose names she—

"Why the hell are you doing that? What are you after?"

"—Happiness."

"_____"

Subaru caught his breath at that immediate response.

Not even glancing at him, Louis clacked her teeth together as an unstable edge crept into her voice.

"What other goal is there? Happiness is the point of living, isn't it? Or did you think outcasts like us were warped about that, too? Wrong. That's wrong. Of course it's wrong! Too wrong! Completely wrong! We're telling you it's wrong!"

"What does stealing other people's memories have to do with happiness…?"

“Have you never thought that life isn’t fair?”

“I have.”

“Aha!”

Biting into the back of her pale hand, Louis questioned Subaru. And she smirked unpleasantly at his immediate answer of yes.

“Of course. We have, too. After all, life isn’t fair. You can’t pick where you are born, you can’t pick your parents, you can’t pick your surroundings, you can’t pick your future, you can’t control anything. That’s the system that’s been made. We’re all just put on a conveyor belt.”

“_____”

“—But what if it didn’t have to be like that?” Louis cocked her head as Subaru remained silent. “What if you could choose where you were born? Your parents? Your surroundings? Your future? What if you could choose whatever you wanted? …Everyone would choose a better life, wouldn’t they? Right?”

“That’s…”

“If they could pick where they were born, pick their parents, pick their surroundings, pick their future, pick everything they wanted, anyone would pick a better life… So we are carefully taking our time, searching for the ultimate life for ourselves.”

“_____”

“It has to exist somewhere! A rosy future where we can feel proud of the life we’ve lived! A life that’s just right for us! And until we encounter that fateful life, we will eat and munch and gnaw and lick and suck and devour! Eat it all! Gluttony!”

Her eyes blazed as she screamed her beautiful ambition out loud.

She genuinely believed, from the bottom of her heart, that this was her personal pursuit of happiness, that this was the one means available to her to secure the best possible future.

She saw no hope in her own life. Because in her mind, the life of the girl Louis Arneb had been far too poor. The start was all wrong. She wanted to undo it. She wanted to win a version of herself that was blessed in birth, in parents, in environment, in future, in talent, in everything.

She had defined that as the requirement for a life that could be celebrated to the greatest extent.

And so…

“You steal other people’s memories…and eat them…for that?”

Understanding what that meant, Subaru was at a loss for words.

As Louis said, she gorged, mindlessly consuming other people's lives.

Men, women, young, old, even other races and species—she gorged on life itself, savoring and indulging in the experiences of every sort of being.

She had snacked on the "good parts" of thousands of lives. Every sort of achievement was just a normal event. There was nothing original to be found. Just boring, tired, ancient things…

"So why are you so focused on me? Why would you go through so much hassle to snack on me? Some stupid form of gluttony?"

"It's nothing so pointless… Because you are our fate."

Subaru glared at her with anger and wariness. When he took her at face value, it was absurd. But the intensity in Louis's eyes as she looked at him wasn't a lie. She was seriously in love with Subaru—or more precisely with his life.

"We've eaten young and old, men and women, people from every age, from all rungs of life. But there's one thing we don't know. Do you know what that is?"

"How should I know? Is it how to grieve your good-for-nothing self?"

"—The experience of death."

Subaru froze with one eye closed.

Louis raised her slender arms and pointed her palms at him.

"No matter how many people's memories we eat, it's impossible. We can never get the memory of death. That seems obvious, right? Memories are a record of life. So they don't exist when you die. —But you, mister, are the only exception."

She seemed genuinely jealous, envious, in love with the ability Return by Death.

This girl who was so bored of the world yearned for the boy who was the only one who could show her something she had never seen before.

"What does it feel like to die? It must be rough, right? It's painful, right? It's hard, right? It hurts, right? But there were times it didn't hurt, too, right? There are stories that it can even feel good, but is that true? Are you actually always happy when you die? Or is it more of a not caring anymore? Is it easy? A climax? Tell me, tell me, tell me, tell me, tell me!"

"…If you have my memories, you should know already."

“As memories! But that’s old! Not fresh! We want something more real. We aren’t satisfied with reheated, reused ingredients. What would satisfy us is a new, fresh, never-before-experienced state of mind! Special memories, one-of-a-kind that no one else in the world can experience! And not just that, but the ease of just redoing things right away if you mess anything up! Even after finding your perfect life, you could ruin it with some sort of mistake, right? But that can’t happen with your life! Don’t worry, we’ll do it carefully, so no one notices.”

“_____”

“Emilia, Beatrice, Ram, Meili, Julius, Echidna, Shaula, Patlash, Petra, Otto, Garfiel, Frederica, Ryuzu, Roswaal, Clind, Annerose, Felt, Reinhard, Old Man Rom, Dumb, Dumber, and Dumbest, Crusch, Ferris, Wilhelm, Ricard, Mimi, Hetaro, TB, Priscilla, Al, Schult, Heinkel, Kiritaka, Liliana—everyone and anyone and everyone! Trick them all and live a happy life!”

Holding her hands out like that, Louis cocked her head cutely.

“So please, let me eat your life until I’m full.”

She pleaded with him.

And she had surely chosen the best method for this setting from all the countless memories inside her.

It’s just proof that no matter how good the ingredients, it’s wasted without a good cook.

One of Subaru’s favorite sayings was that there was no such thing as bad ingredients. Just bad dishes.

He had never felt it so painfully as in this moment, though.

Countless experiences that any number of normal people couldn’t possibly put together. And he had never seen anyone waste that much potential before.

“—There won’t be a third time. My pain, my death, my life, all of it is mine. I’m not giving you a single thing!”

“_____”

“I hope you starve, dumbass. If the only thing you can choose in life is how you die, then that’s what I recommend. You should suffer more than anyone else in the world.”

Subaru drew his thumb across his neck.

Louis’s eyes widened, and then she looked at her hands. And then she covered her face and looked up at the white sky.

“Aaaaaaah. We messed up. Screwed up. Blundered. Flubbed. Ruined. Dropped the ball. We botched it. We blew it…

aaaaarghhhhhhh!”

Her knees trembled, and she slumped to the ground.

That she was that stunned proved she had really been serious about trying to persuade Subaru. And because of this result, it went without saying that her mind cracked.

“I won’t be what you wanted. My name is Subaru Natsuki. The name Kenichi Natsuki and Nahoko Natsuki gave me. I am me. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“Even though you might be overwritten and erased?”

“Let me teach you a magic spell. That is one thing, and this is another.”

He took the magic spell he had used on Julius and pointed it at himself.

The current Subaru might disappear if he managed to bring the original Subaru Natsuki back. But he might not. There could be a way not to get erased. And even if there was only enough room for one person, he might find a way to share it.

"I don't mind tracking mud inside when I enter people's hearts, so I don't need to sit neatly in a chair, either. That's my answer. Get a haircut, stupid."

With that parting shot, he turned away from Louis.

Now that she had lost her will to fight, there was no need for him to be wary. More importantly, he needed to figure out how to get back from this crazy space.

And why is Reid's book of the dead even connected to this place…?

"—Argh. We just have to leave it to dear brother and brother dearest, then, huh?"

Louis's sigh hit Subaru's back as he slipped into thought.

Dear brother and brother dearest. Those words made Subaru stop as he was about to go looking for the exit.

Those names she had said before. If his guess was right…

"Lye and Roy. Gourmet and Garbage?"

"We can't leave this place. So we can't control what we eat unless dear brother and brother dearest eat it for us… So we asked them."

Subaru caught his breath, getting a bad feeling as he waited for her to continue.

It felt long before she said something else, but finally, as if toying with his unease, Louis moved her red lips.

"This is your second time coming here, isn't it? So dear brother and brother dearest should have both noticed…exactly where you are."

"Wait, your brothers are coming here…?!"

"They both are very interested in you, mister. That makes perfect sense. After all…you're packed full of experiences we've never tasted."

Brothers rushing to their sister's side when she was in danger. On paper, it was a heartwarming story about a loving family, but the truth was just a race to satisfy their own desires.

Either way, that made it even more important for Subaru to find a way out of this space. But as that thought crossed his mind

and he reached his hand forward, the world around him cracked.

"Wha—? Is this an exit?!"

In front of his eyes, he could see a gap in space through the cracks. It was connected to a path that shouldn't have been there.

A path born of his determination to return.

"Before I go back, you…"

"You can't. It's impossible for you. We wish you could have, though."

"_____"

He couldn't say anything as Louis grabbed her slender neck.

"Even in the depths of paranoia, even in desperation, you won't kill yourself or anyone else, not even outcasts. You're just a spineless coward. Even though we nibbled you so gently."

"…Get some braces, asshole."

Subaru flipped her off as she made an infuriated face.

He didn't even watch to see her reaction before moving into the rift in the space. But just as he did, there was a single moment's hesitation.

Not because Louis was bothering him. He was content to never see her face again. What he regretted wasn't leaving Louis, but the voice that had put him back on his feet. The girl who had appeared for a brief moment in order to rouse Subaru Natsuki's spirits. The girl whose memory and name were stolen so she was the only one who could call out to him at the end of the world.

"It's okay. I remember my promise."

Subaru Natsuki wouldn't forget that.

We'll meet again soon.

—He hoped he could hear her kind voice then, and not just more scolding.

"_____"

With that, Subaru leaped into the rift to go back to his comrades.

6

—The white void fell away, and the vibrant world on the other side reconstructed itself.

It was a mysterious feeling, like being in a colorless space, watching from the inside as the world was progressively painted in color.

The Odo Ragna cradle. The corridors of memory.

Subaru Natsuki's existence had been torn from that space outside the world. His fragmentary consciousness was bound back up, and gradually his self was reconstructed…

"—Subaru."

The first thing he felt was a badly parched throat.

Then something cold and hard against his back and bottom. He had apparently been sitting against a wall. Opening his eyes, he blinked several times until the world came into focus, and then he saw the blue eyes peering into his.

The eyes with a butterfly-like pattern, and the adorable face that went with them…

"Beatrice…?"

"…You seem conscious again. You saying Betty's name first would seem to indicate you didn't lose your memory somewhere along the way."

"…Yeah. I remember. You're a cutie."

Subaru responded as relief flooded Beatrice's eyes, and then she started touching his face and chest. Her little palms felt ticklish. He also inspected himself.

He had given Beatrice a confident reply without knowing how Louis—how Gluttony—ate memories and names. It was hard to prove the existence of memories.

But he stifled that fear and told himself that Subaru Natsuki was right where he should be.

"It…should be okay. The promises and the love are all there in my heart."

His heart raced when he thought about Emilia, and because he cared about Beatrice, he wanted to pat her head. And he prayed from the bottom of his heart for his comrades' safety. That was the proof that he was Subaru.

"…How long was I out? It doesn't feel like it's only been a moment."

Using Beatrice's warmth to steady and center himself, he realized he was in a different position from when he had gotten pulled into the corridors of memory. He should have been in front of the shelf, but he had been pushed off to the wall, and more than anything…

"Emilia-chan and Ram, and Julius and Shaula aren't here…?"

Subaru furrowed his brow.

"Looks like you woke up, Natsuki."

Echidna touched her light purple hair as she walked over to him. Meili was beside her, looking bored. Noticing he was awake, she pursed her lips.

"Finally? You're such a sleepyhead. I was so tired of waiting."

"Sleepyhead? That's a cute turn of phrase… As it happens, I finally made it back from an unexpected life-or-death struggle. Show a little sympathy."

"An unexpected life-or-death struggle… I would love to know more about that, but while you were sleeping, things started moving here, too. That's why Julius and the others aren't here."

Beatrice, Echidna, and Meili were with Subaru in Taygeta. From the look on Echidna's face, it was clear she was concerned about the safety of everyone else who wasn't present.

"You were asleep for almost an hour, I suppose. The other books only took a few seconds, so we were worried that something might have happened to you."

"An hour…that…seems to match up with what it felt like to me. What happened out here?"

"Shaula noticed something strange. She said something was approaching the tower from outside. She raced away before we could stop her."

"Something…approaching…"

Prioritizing explaining the situation over double-checking Subaru's condition, Echidna pointed toward the stairs down to the next floor.

"The cool knight chased after her. And then Silver-Hair and the maid went to check on the sleeping girl," Meili added.

"So that's why the four of them aren't here. But it was the right choice to go to Rem." Subaru nodded.

Seeing his reaction, Echidna furrowed her brow.

"Natsuki? From that reaction…is there something you know?"

"Ye…ah. There's no point in hiding it. I'll skip right to the end."

He had not fully digested everything that had happened in the corridors of memory. But he also knew that Echidna didn't fully trust him after his losing his memory and having the bond between them reset. That unnecessary suspicion would only be a barrier to them banding together to overcome the unprecedented disaster coming for them.

So…?

"Well, here it is, no holding back. The plan to read Reid's book and make a strategy using his past failed. I couldn't see his past, and this isn't the time for that anymore."

"You couldn't see his past…? What happened, then?"

"Something got in the way. The Archbishop of Gluttony."

"—?!"

Everyone's expression tensed in shock.

Archbishop *and* Gluttony *both probably mean something to them. Considering Rem's and Julius's situations, that much is obvious.*

And in the first place, the reason they set out for the Pleiades Watchtower was…

"So, while you were unconscious, you were facing off with the Archbishop of Gluttony? Is that the unexpected life-or-death struggle you were talking about?"

"That's right. Just as I slid into the book of the dead, I was taken to an empty, white space instead of exploring Reid's memories…and I ran into a girl calling herself Louis. From what she said, it was some place called the cradle of Odo Ragna or corridors of memory or something."

"Odo Ragna…"

Beatrice murmured as Subaru tried to cover everything he had heard that seemed important.

"You know what it is?" Subaru asked. "Louis said it was a mechanism to make sure the world isn't destroyed. Well, she said a lot of things…"

"Betty does not know the specifics. But what is called Odo Ragna is known as the center of the world…the place where all mana returns."

"The place where all mana returns…"

It was a grandiose description, but having been there, Subaru couldn't bring himself to laugh it off. That white space had definitely felt like a world apart from the normal world. Whether it was some place far removed or at the heart of the world, it was a distinction without much difference. That place was filled with contradictions.

"So you ran into Gluttony there, but you're okay?" Meili chimed in.

She squatted so that her eyes matched Subaru's where he was sitting, peering into his black pupils.

“Gluttony eats people’s memories and names, right? Are you sure you didn’t forget a bunch of stuff again, mister?”

“Yeah, I’m definitely fine. I can say with confidence I didn’t lose anything there.”

“How can you—?”

“Because when Gluttony had me cornered, Rem saved me.”

All of their eyes widened when he said that name so emphatically. Beatrice in particular had a very large reaction.

“Subaru, that name…”

“She gave me a good kick in the butt. So I’m fine.”

Subaru nodded as he looked into Beatrice’s big, trembling eyes. Seeing that, she started to say something a few times and then gently pushed her forehead against his chest.

He gently rubbed her back.

“—? There’s a strange tremor coming from below…”

“Echidna! Is everyone safe?!”

Someone sprinted up the stairs, rushing into Taygeta with a shout. Echidna spun, stunned at seeing who it was.

“Julius? You look pretty rushed.”

“Something unexpected has happened. We must all gather as soon as…mrgh.”

As Julius answered Echidna, his gaze turned to Subaru sitting on the floor. His face tensed from nerves and vigilance, and his yellow eyes widened slightly.

“So you are awake, Subaru. That is good news. Do you remember me?”

“Ummm, who are…?”

“…As expected.”

“I’m kidding! You’re Julius Juukulius! Don’t take a joke so seriously!”

“Ha. I was joking, too. Since I am going to have to say something not the least bit amusing.”

Subaru grimaced when he realized he’d been had. Smiling briefly at that reaction, Julius took on a solemn expression for the serious talk.

“I would like to hear more from Subaru now that he has returned, but there is urgent news. The disturbance that Ms. Shaula sensed outside has been confirmed.”

“Is that what’s causing this rumbling?”

Subaru pointed down at the floor—at the tower beneath him.

He had noticed the rumbling faintly just before Julius rushed in.

“Yes.” Julius nodded. “This rumbling we’ve been hearing for a little while is coming from footsteps.”

“Footsteps?”

Subaru and Beatrice both cocked their heads at that unexpected answer.

Echidna and Meili also looked dubious as Julius gestured to the outside of the tower.

“—The demon beasts throughout the Auguria Dunes are converging on this tower as one. Ms. Shaula is engaging them in combat, but it is only a matter of time until they press inside.”

7

—At the same time, in the white world Subaru Natsuki had left.

A single girl was lying down, covering her face, wailing as she buried her face in her own long blond hair.

A furious lament, like a sinner burning in hell, longing for heaven…

“Argh, argh, argh, damn it! Not even looking back!”

“We won’t allow it. You won’t get away. Absolutely never!”

“Don’t you dare think this is over, Subaru Natsuki…!”

“Your life belongs to us!!!”

CHAPTER 4

FIVE OBSTACLES

1

—Demon beasts were converging on the watchtower.

Everyone tensed, and a grave look crossed all of their faces when they heard Julius's report.

It was impossible not to be shaken, learning that the faint rumble they could feel reverberating throughout the entire tower came from a horde of demon beasts stampeding toward them.

"I don't have much more than a fuzzy feel for how huge this desert is, but…"

"Auguria is a breeding ground for demon beasts. The danger from demon beasts hiding in the sand and targeting people was always a graver danger than the harsh climate," Julius elaborated.

"The story goes that there was once a grand plan to assemble an army to slay all the demon beasts in the sands," Echidna added. "You can probably guess how it went, based on the rumbling."

In other words, Subaru's hope that the rumble was all bark and no bite and that there was only maybe a zoo's worth of enemies coming at them was badly misplaced. Apparently, there really was a savannah's worth of demon beasts out there.

It was certainly a despair-inducing problem, but…

"—So you came to get me, then?" Meili fiddled with her braided hair.

She was the only one who didn't show any sign of unease when she heard that demon beasts were coming, and fast. Not because she didn't find it strange. But because she didn't consider demon beasts dangerous.

"Though it is shameful, that is correct. I would ask you to lend

us your strength.” Julius nodded with a strained expression.

Use Meili, with her ability to give orders to demon beasts, to deal with the stampede of demon beasts charging at them. It was the right answer. And one that wasn’t an option last time.

“Subaru? What is it? You have an odd look on your face?”

“…Unfortunately, I was born with this face.”

“It’s just your naturally scary eyes, I suppose.”

Beatrice noticed Subaru’s bitter look and was looking up at him with concern. He took a deep breath.

“Did you notice something, Subaru?”

“Spare me the rapid-fire questions. Though it’s my fault for making that all-knowing sort of look. So in addition to apologizing, I have something else to add. An exclusive scoop I picked up from the book of the dead.”

Julius waited with bated breath, and the others’ eyes widened. Honestly, he could guess the reaction to what he was about to say, but he couldn’t explain the situation without it.

The reason for the sudden change, for all the demon beasts rushing at the tower…

“It’s Gluttony. The Archbishop of Gluttony is sending all the demon beasts at the tower.”

“—! Why?”

“That’s probably my fault. In Reid’s book of the dead, I met one part of Gluttony. Or more precisely, I met her again. Apparently, I met her last night, too. That’s…”

“That is why you lost your memories.”

Subaru nodded at Julius.

It was weird to say that it was just as he’d hoped, but Julius was good at picking up on things. He quickly connected Gluttony’s name and ability and reached the conclusion Subaru had wanted him to find.

“It seems like they’ve known where we are since last night. So a half day’s travel…with pets in tow.”

“Considering normal movement speed, it is difficult to imagine reaching this tower in only half a day. Particularly accounting for any obstructions from demon beasts along the way. However…”

“However?”

“If, unlike our rough trip, Gluttony has some way of controlling the demon beasts…then it would purely be a question of how fast they can move.”

Subaru frowned and crossed his arms at Echidna's comment.

"What do you mean by that?"

"—Even if it takes time traveling along the ground, it's a different story through the air."

"Through the air…!" Subaru's black eyes widened at that unexpected angle. "Right, I was just assuming flying wasn't an option…but it's normal to fly if you have magic!"

"That's not true at all. Flying through the air is a composite technique. Ordinarily, it isn't done because it is dangerous. Only a fool or a genius would use it. Or else a foolish genius, I suppose."

"Marquis Mathers is famous for arriving at the castle through the air…"

"And he is a foolish genius."

Subaru looked at Beatrice as she sulked adorably. *I guess she's not a fan of this unknown marquis.*

But he cocked his head a bit in learning that flying by using magic wasn't normal.

"If it's not magic, then a giant bird…ah, a dragon! What about riding on a flying dragon?!"

"The technique of controlling flying dragons is a secret passed down in the Volakian Empire to the south. The empire has jealously guarded the technique, but considering Gluttony's methods, it would be a relatively simple matter to steal that."

"They could just ask someone who knows. Take a big bite out of their memories."

The thought made Subaru realize just how powerful their enemy was when it came to the information war.

Just eat someone's memories, and they would instantly learn whatever they knew. Eating their name would erase that first act and even that person from everyone else's mind.

—*"Memories make the man."* What an elegant way of putting it.

"_____"

Subaru believed a person's worth and their being were engraved in memories and history. He felt it all the more strongly now, which made him despise Gluttony's cowardly power from the bottom of his heart.

Gluttony's ability to steal people's memories was a malicious blight that profaned everything it touched. Claiming it was for their own well-being, using it in the pursuit of happiness—what a stupid idea. They were warping fate in a way that went against the natural

order…

—Is that something someone who returns from the dead should say, mister?

"—!"

Subaru bit the inside of his cheek to block out the unpleasant face that flashed through the back of his mind.

I'm not going to put myself up on a pedestal. I'm not going to get sucked into her tempo. I don't want to let her take anything more.

"I'd love to make her howl, but…her brothers come first."

"I was aware of there being multiple Archbishops of Gluttony, but have you learned something more?"

"It's really hard to be sure, because of her weird pronoun tic, but there are probably three Gluttonies. The one rambling away inside the book of the dead, and I think she has two older brothers."

If he took Louis's words at face value, there was dear brother and brother dearest.

"We can't take her words at face value, but she didn't seem like the type to rely on trickery, either. Not that I'm one to talk, since I almost fell for her trap."

What would have happened if I played right into her hands and strangled her? If it hadn't been for her *voice, I would have…*

"…Looks like we can't afford to just keep chatting."

A large tremor reached even the shelves of Taygeta. Sensing the impending situation, Subaru grabbed Beatrice and stood.

"So it would seem. Let's continue after reinforcing Ms. Shaula. Ms. Meili?"

"Yes, I can go whenever. I love to work… You know that's sarcasm, right?"

"Yeah, I could tell without you saying. Anyway, let's hurry! Time to turn this around!"

Only Subaru could understand the true meaning of that. It was something only Subaru, who had experienced the disaster assaulting this tower multiple times, really grasped.

But everyone nodded, answering his call.

"—Oooooh!!!"

And so Subaru Natsuki's—or rather, Subaru Natsuki's and his friends'—battle began once more.

2

“Still, though, it’s one crazy thing after another…losing my memories, taking forever to wake up. I’m sorry!”

“It’s not like everything is your fault. You don’t have to apologize, Subaru.”

“Really? It’s okay? You don’t all hate me, now?”

“What are you so scared of? It’s fine, I suppose. Betty won’t hate you. If anything, I l-l-l-…”

Holding his hand and running alongside him, Beatrice tried to muster some words of encouragement.

“I got it, I got it. It’s okay, I feel better already. I love you, too.” Subaru simply nodded.

Honestly, it was more embarrassing to have that last part put into words. It was a lot easier for him to say stuff like that than to have someone say it to him. He didn’t doubt his own feelings, after all.

“Where is Shaula?!”

“Yes, we’re almost…there!”

In the lead, Julius pointed to a side path hidden in the stone wall. Passing through the deviously camouflaged passage, they entered a hidden space.

“_____”

The moment they left the tower, they were met by a fierce sandy wind and heard a series of unfamiliar sounds—almost like the sound of countless panes of glass shattering.

The source of it was…

“Urrryaryarya

floating in the air. But that didn't change their impression, and it was clear from the steep angle that they were aimed at the ground.

And then…

"—Infinite Hell's Snipe!"

"What the hell?! That's so cool!"

The moment she shouted her attack, the white cannons flashed.

Drowning out Subaru's dumb comment, the sound of glass shattering filled the sky above the sands. Simultaneously, the cannons lost their form, unraveling and melting away.

That was the source of the sound that had greeted them earlier. And the goal of the orchestra of magic circles she was conducting was one thing—white flashes that swept the ground below.

The moment the beams made contact with the sands, the ground was consumed by massive explosions. The demon beasts running furiously across the sands were no safer, splattering blood and flesh everywhere as they exploded, too.

The dry sands greedily soaked up the fresh blood while other demon beasts trampled over the corpses. Her bombardment cut down more than a hundred of the charging demon beasts.

But even Shaula's magic of mass destruction was just a drop in the bucket compared to the sheer number of monsters surrounding the tower like a swarm of ants.

That was just how many demon beasts had gathered from across the desert.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa…I don't really want to hear it, but…"

"Only one section of the tower's surroundings is visible from this vantage point. However, you may safely assume the same scene is occurring at all points around the tower, yes."

"You don't know that. What if this side of the tower's the only one with sugar water poured all over it?"

"If it is really that stupid of a reason, Betty will pulverize whoever is responsible."

There was an unending rumble that came from the writhing black mass down below. Subaru felt a little woozy at realizing that it was happening even where he couldn't see. And as a digression, he really wanted to register a complaint about the visuals of the demon beasts he could see in the distance.

They're all too grotesque and weird and incomprehensible. God's design skills are definitely a C– at best.

"How was it, Master! Did you see my performance?! Also, the nice view I gave you from behind? What did you think?!"

"You're not discouraged at all, even in a situation like this. That's crazy. I'm genuinely impressed! Also, nice figure! And I don't have the composure to take a close look, so just focus on the fighting!"

"Okay, Google! Deeefense! Oooffense!"

He had to give it up for her insane mental fortitude. He only had half-assed comments for her, which made him feel guilty as he watched her fight so bravely.

I want to at least give her a little reward once this is all over, but…

"Getting out of this is priority number one…! Meili!"

"You don't have to shout." Meili frowned and covered her ears as she looked at the ground. "But…"

"But?! But what?! 'But do you mind if all of the demon beasts

get killed?' Yeah, that's fine. In fact, please do kill them all!"

"Don't go expecting the impossible. Even I can't control this many beasties."

Ignoring Subaru's irrational hope, she braced her adorable young face. And licked her peach lips almost coquettishly.

"—I'll just have to use the ones I prepared and let them fight."

"_____*Sssshh*!"

Meili pointed her hand at the ground as an enormous spout of sand shot upward.

They were far away, so even large demon beasts looked tiny, but the shape of what burst from the ground there was still clearly visible. It was gigantic. A massive worm, probably fifty to a hundred feet long, was crushing nearby demon beasts with its massive body.

"That's…" Subaru gasped.

"I tamed it in advance on the off chance something like this happened. It was supposed to be for sneaking away, but I messed up that." Meili stuck out her tongue.

As it happened, Subaru's surprise wasn't so much from the worm, but from the fact that he recognized it. It was the demon beast he had encountered when he tried to flee from the tower.

Thinking back on it, he had run into trouble when it leaped out of the ground, too. The image of it being blown away by a white light afterward was also in the corner of his mind.

So that worm was Meili. And the light was Shaula?

He was a little slow to pick up on it, between the shock and awe, but as Meili acted tough, Subaru reached out a hand and roughly tousled her hair while she couldn't defend herself.

"Wah, ah, stop it!"

"I don't know if it's your nature or just a habit, but you don't have to put up an act. I don't believe you were planning to leave us behind and run."

"Mrgh, how can you say that?"

"Because I was you and you were me. Everyone's different and everyone's special."

"Huh?"

Meili looked completely lost, and Subaru had no intention of explaining.

At a fundamental level, Subaru could see through her deceit. Because he had seen her memories as if they were his own, he was

the person who knew her best in this world.

Still resting his hand on her head, Subaru scrutinized the situation they were in this time. He finally learned why the demon beasts had been pouring into the tower in the last loop. There had probably been a stampede just like this, and the reason Julius had been fighting the centaurs running wild on the lower floor was because Shaula couldn't handle them all.

That wouldn't happen this time, because…

"Captain Meili was missing due to an unforeseen accident last time, but she's here now! Which means…"

—It was possible to have Julius deal with a different problem.

Realizing that, Subaru understood that they would need to put the right people in the right places if they had any hope of dealing with all the problems cropping up right now.

—The stampede of demon beasts blotting out the desert.

—The Archbishops of Gluttony coming to attack the tower.

—The giant, ferocious scorpion wandering around the tower like it owned the place.

—The enormous dark shadow swallowing the tower and the desert around it.

—And Reid Astrea, who would start roaming freely around the tower.

"On our side, we've got me and Beatrice, Emilia-chan and Ram. Meili and Shaula, and Echidna and Julius…" Subaru started going through their active roster.

"Are you going to include the two land dragons and the healing spirit in the green room?" Echidna asked.

Nodding, Subaru mentally added Patlash and the big ground dragon down below to the list as well.

She's right. This is no time to be picky. I need to play every card we have and kick this crafty brain into high gear to figure out how we can win.

I'd like to start with getting a handle on where everyone currently is…

"—Wait, Emilia-chan and Ram just went to the green room to check on Rem and Patlash, right?"

Subaru's voice went hoarse when he realized they still hadn't

shown up.

The green room was on the fourth floor, the same floor that they were on. It was possible they didn't know where this place was and were just wandering the tower, but…

"In this situation, if they merely didn't know our location, Ms. Ram would find a way. Or else Lady Emilia would break down the wall herself."

"Ram aside, I wonder a little bit about what kind of person you think Emilia-chan is. There's no way those cute little arms can break through a wall. And even if she could, she doesn't have that sort of personality…right?"

"Your loss of confidence at the end speaks volumes. But Betty has a bad feeling, too."

"—! Shaula! Meili! Can we leave this place to you?!"

With Julius and Beatrice agreeing with his concerns, Subaru shouted to Shaula and Meili. Shaula gave a thumbs-up while setting up more magic artillery, while Meili brushed her braided hair aside and puffed her chest out.

"Leave this place to me and go on ahead!"

"I'll take care of this much somehow. I won't go easy on you if you don't find them safe and sound."

Shaula dropped the number one line everyone wanted to say at least once, and Meili was more than reassuring, so Subaru and the others raced off to find their missing friends.

Ducking under the wall, they burst back into the passage—

"Meili and Shaula are holding the line for us, but is there any chance of the demon beasts getting into the tower?"

"It's not impossible. The underground labyrinth we fell into…I guess you don't remember. It's possible to get into the tower from there. But, thanks to Meili…"

"You think the worm rampaging might've collapsed the underground passages?"

"Given the number of branching paths, I don't think they can handle that sort of stress."

Subaru clenched his fist to celebrate a small victory. Meili's assistance was curbing the stampede in more than one way. If they could keep the monsters from getting in from above and below, that meant their defense was rock solid. Now that the swarm of demon beasts had been handled, there were only four more major problems…

“Barusu!”

“—! Ram?!”

As they were running toward the green room, a voice called out from down the hall. As they looked up, a black shadow rushed furiously toward the four of them—Patlash.

Ram was holding on to the intelligent land dragon’s back while carrying the sleeping Rem tightly in her arms.

“Ram! And Patlash and Rem! Are you guys all right?!”

“Yes, somehow. We had a terrible time while you were napping. How could you sleep through everything? Stand up at once.”

“I’m sorry! I don’t need to hear it from *both* of you! And look, I’m standing up! Actually, I’m running!”

Ram dismounted, leaving Rem in the saddle while giving Subaru a verbal lashing. Coincidentally, it was so similar to how Rem had torn into him in the dream, he couldn’t help the sentimental thought that they really were alike in more ways than just appearance.

“—? Your odd attitude is bothering me, but this isn’t the time.”

“Yeah, there’s a lot I want to tell you, too. Wasn’t—?” Subaru started to ask about Emilia, but Ram sharply interrupted him.

“Down the passage, we encountered an opponent calling himself the Archbishop of Gluttony.”

Daunted by the force of her words, Subaru, Beatrice, and Julius all fell silent. By process of elimination, Echidna was the one to respond, as she was the least shaken.

“The Archbishop of Gluttony? Down this way?”

“Yes, that’s right. And that Archbishop is fighting with someone.”

“…Someone?”

Her explanation was sounding stranger and stranger. Ram’s voice was as full of confidence and vigor as ever, but the vagueness gave him a bad feeling.

“Yes.” Ram nodded. “—Some unknown silver-haired girl is fighting the Archbishop of Gluttony. She told us to run.”

3

—An unknown silver-haired girl.

“Huh?”

Subaru's mind halted for a moment at Ram's unexpected phrasing.

If it had just been "a silver-haired girl," it would have been an unhelpfully indirect phrasing, but it wouldn't have made Subaru feel quite so odd.

But adding that extra "unknown" changed the meaning dramatically.

"An unknown silver-haired girl…?" Subaru murmured.

"Yes." Ram nodded. "Someone I've not seen once in this tower. At the very least, she didn't seem to be an enemy… In light of the situation, I retreated for now. However—"

"—even with help, it's a different story, with an opponent like Gluttony."

Julius picked up for her, his expression grave at having heard the word *Gluttony*. Touching the knight's sword at his hip, he pursed his lips.

"It is an unexpected encounter, but if we are to meet him here as an enemy, we cannot allow him to escape. Our goal is to find a method to undo the damage done by Gluttony and Lust. If one has appeared, then we should ask directly."

"Agreed. I have no intention of letting him leave alive, either. We have to make sure he regrets so casually showing his face before us."

"W-wait! Wait a second! I get the enthusiasm! I get it! But…"

Subaru suddenly pulled the brakes as they let their powerful animosity toward Gluttony fly.

Julius, who was cut off from the world, and Ram, whose memories of her beloved sister were stolen, both had a lot of motivation to go after Gluttony.

But the problem here is…

"Emilia's name is missing from your conversation. Why?"

"_____"

Getting a bad feeling, he just came out and asked.

Ram's unnatural description and Julius's lack of reaction had tipped him off. Looking around, Beatrice and Echidna didn't seem like they noticed anything strange, either. They just accepted Ram's statement about an unknown silver-haired girl.

"—Who is Emilia?" Ram furrowed her brow.

"—!"

Subaru's throat clenched in shock. Looking around, Julius,

Beatrice, and Echidna were all staring at him in confusion. He couldn't hide his shock.

"But…"

It was barely just a minute. Seconds ago, we were talking about Emilia. Wasn't the whole reason we left the balcony specifically to meet up with Emilia and Ram?

"Subaru, is…?"

The first to notice the change was Beatrice, who was holding his hand. But the others quickly realized that the name he'd said had to be crucial.

"Emilia… Is that the silver-haired girl's name?"

"…That's right. If there was a silver-haired girl, then she's Emilia. Our comrade." Subaru's voice was wavering. "That's why she told you to run and stayed behind. That's why she's still fighting."

"That is…possible. It is a feeling I've experienced myself."

Julius touched his hair, as if hearing something difficult to believe. He couldn't hide his surprise, and Subaru was reminded again just how terrifying Gluttony's power was in its reach, effect, immediacy, and vileness.

Honestly, even though he was aware that his own memories had been stolen, it still didn't feel real. It was impossible to forget the misunderstandings and paranoia he had felt in losing his memories, as well as the negative feelings he had directed at all of them. It was a dark moment he would rather never think of again.

But even with that, it didn't feel quite real. There was something indefinite, hard to describe about searching for something you didn't have. Like fishing out at sea on a moonless night.

That was why it had not really felt quite real. But not this time.

Forgetting Emilia, someone they had just been talking about, a comrade they had struggled through adversity with until now, in just an instant. *—Is there anything this disgusting?*

Mowing through other people's bonds in search of their own happiness was an unforgivable sin.

"—Ugh, ngh."

"Ram?!"

As Subaru grasped the shock he was feeling, Ram suddenly fell to her knee. She was breathing heavily while leaning against Patlash's leg.

“What is it? Are you all right?”

“…Just a little…headache.” Ram shook her head. “Thinking about that unknown person.”

“About Emilia…?”

Subaru furrowed his brow as Ram looked like she was in pain. If Gluttony had stolen Emilia’s name, Ram should have seen it happen.

Maybe that’s the cause?

“Subaru.” Beatrice touched his shoulder and slowly shook her head. “It would be better to not force her to remember more. She’s missing too much.”

“Missing…too much…?”

“The incompleteness of Gluttony’s authority is showing. There are too many pieces of memory involving the person stolen that can’t be patched. Discrepancies are forming.”

Subaru was at a loss for words, but he quickly realized what Beatrice was getting at.

Ram was Emilia’s caretaker—she had been a close servant, essentially. What they felt toward each other might have been difficult to understand, but their relationship had an unmistakable warmth to it.

After losing all that, there was a void inside Ram where Emilia had been. The fruitless effort of searching for that something crucial to the structure of life was eating away at her.

Echidna stood next to Ram, whose face was still twisted in pain.

“I’ll stay with her.”

Subaru was surprised, but she just shrugged.

“We don’t have time to debate things. All the more so with Gluttony here and one of our comrades fighting them, even after her name was stolen. We can’t stop now.”

“Please take care of Ms. Ram, Echidna. Take Patlash and get far away from the battle.”

“Yeah, leave it to me. I know this is a critical moment for you, Julius, but don’t get too heated.”

“I understand. My fighting spirit is chilled to the core. Just like my blade.”

Julius immediately accepted Echidna’s suggestion and turned his gallant face forward. The desire to fight seeping out of him was so powerful that Subaru hesitated to say anything.

“Ram.”

“It’s vexing, but I would just be a burden right now. Leave me. But don’t kill Gluttony. I want to make him regret ever being born.”

“The enthusiasm’s reassuring, but take it easy for now! We’ll be back!”

“Yes. Go take care of it.”

Subaru nodded at Echidna, rubbed Patlash’s neck, and looked at the sleeping princess on her back. As always, her eyes were closed in a never-ending dream, and she was breathing so softly, it was almost imperceptible.

That’s enough for now. I’ve already heard the words I needed to hear from her.

“Just you wait, Gluttony…! I’m sick of letting you eat everything!”

Honestly, the more he thought about it, the more questions he had.

Why did Gluttony’s power not seem to affect Subaru?

Emilia’s name had been stolen, and she had disappeared from everyone else’s memories, but her name, appearance, and voice were still clear as ever in his mind.

And the faint feelings he felt toward her were still lingering in his breast, too.

“Is it because I’m from a different world…?”

Maybe the rules of this world didn’t apply to him.

If memories in this world were a record of life that was removed from a dead person’s soul in the corridors of memory, then Gluttony’s power to snatch them away didn’t influence Subaru because he was an irregular existence who hailed from a different world.

In which case, what about the old Subaru Natsuki’s memories? Supposing he’s dead, are they etched into the corridors of memory?

Or else…

“…Is the reason I can come back because they can’t be stored there?”

It was a chilling theory.

If that was the answer to the mechanism behind Return by Death, then he would be trapped in the cycle of this world forever.

Bluntly, no matter how many decades he spent here, he wouldn’t even be allowed to die of old age. Standing beyond the rules of the world, Subaru could try to live his life to the fullest, but was Subaru Natsuki without a world for his—?

“Icebrand Arts!”

A sharp, clear voice rang out, tearing through his thoughts.

Looking up, he saw the passage to the green room up ahead frozen white and felt a tremendous chill wind pass over his skin.

And the source of that wind was a snow fairy, spinning as if dancing through diamond dust. No, that was no fairy. It was Emilia, twirling as her silver hair fluttered behind her.

“—Urrya! Hah! Ey! Ey! Yah!”

Holding twin blades of ice in her hands, Emilia unleashed a torrent of attacks. Her grunts sounded almost comical, but there was nothing cute about how fast her blades sliced through the air.

Her attacks were precise, flying toward her opponent with the singular intent of bringing him down.

“That’s…”

As Emilia spun with ice swords in hand, the passage froze over, creating a scene that felt like it was a world away from the tower in the middle of a desert.

The ice magic she used even affected her surroundings. And it seemed to be abnormally powerful, even for this world, judging by how Beatrice and Julius caught their breaths in seeing it.

But even more than that—

“Ah-ha-ha! Not bad, not bad, not bad at all, because it’s not bad, and you’re not bad! That’s why it’s worth our while to eat you!”

The sneering creature easily parried and deflected her ice slashes before making a dramatic announcement.

It was a boy with long, disheveled, dark brown hair and a mad smile on his lips. He seemed to be in his midteens and looked shabby, even filthy. He certainly didn’t look healthy, but more important was the loathsome gleam in his eyes. It was a glimpse of the despair and desire he felt toward life that made him scorn everyone. That was why he didn’t feel anything when he consumed people.

It was obvious at a glance. It almost went without saying. Subaru found it hard to accept the fact that there could be anyone other than Louis Arneb with eyes like that.

“—The Archbishop of Gluttony!”

“Aha! A guest! Or maybe it’s the main dish! We’ve been wanting to meet you, too, mister. It seems you took good care of

our sister!”

Hearing Subaru’s howl, Gluttony deepened his evil smirk as he parried another of Emilia’s slashes. Seeing that reaction, Emilia noticed they were there.

“Ah! Everyone! Umm, you probably don’t know who I am, but he’s the enemy! A bad person! Leave this to me…even if you probably don’t know who I am!”

Emilia understood the position she was in as she spoke with her comrades. She surely had experienced the shock of Ram’s memory of her being lost. It was an experience Subaru couldn’t even begin to imagine. But even so, she not only courageously bought Ram enough time for her to escape, she was also concerned for Subaru and the others who rushed over, even as she continued fighting Gluttony.

With a flood of emotions in his heart, Subaru shouted.

“It’s okay, Emilia-chan! I haven’t forgotten!”

“_____”

“I’m never going to forget again! No matter what happens, I will never forget you!”

Raising his fist, he shouted at her back.

Emilia’s eyes widened when she heard it, but they creased an instant later.

“Nnn!”

Subaru couldn’t say for sure what sort of emotion she felt in that moment. But seeing the smile that crossed her face and how she eagerly charged at Gluttony, he was fairly sure that at least it wasn’t a bad feeling.

Watching the same scene from behind Subaru, Julius had a smile on his face.

“I doubt you are aware just how powerful your words were just now.”

“Huh?”

Subaru turned to him, because it sounded like it had some sort of deeper meaning to it, but Julius didn’t respond. Instead, he drew the sword from his hip, and tracing a beautiful arc, he held it at the ready.

“It goes without saying, but she is our ally, isn’t she, Subaru?”

“Yeah, that’s right. There’s no way someone that cute would be our enemy!”

“Understood.”

Julius nodded, and then his shape faded. —No, it was just an optical illusion.

The next instant, he accelerated with a single step, leaping into the icy melee with a thrust that Gluttony caught by crossing his arms in front of his chest before being flung backward.

“Whoops, mister…”

“I have been waiting for this moment, Gluttony!”

Julius’s intense attack slammed into the smirking Gluttony, but the Archbishop leaped backward, mitigating the force of the impact. He landed with his feet on the frozen wall as his gloomy voice called out.

“Whoa, don’t be in such a rush. Sorry, but we don’t share what we eat. We don’t remember you. Whatever it is, it’s something Roy did, not us, right?”

“—!”

“Well, saying it doesn’t much matter is one way to look at it. Roy aside, we don’t really have much interest in you, mister. You don’t really meet our standards for food.”

“Your standards?”

“Yeah, that’s right. And…”

Gluttony let his arms hang limply, the short blades fixed to his wrists biting into the floor. He stared at Julius, talking about an awfully ominous-sounding standard. Then…

“Hiiyah!!!”

“—?!”

Emilia lowered her hands, blasting a chunk of ice at the cultist without hesitation.

It was a merciless shot, and the hall wasn’t very wide, so she was about to crush the enemy. Interrupted in the middle of his speech, Gluttony showed a changed expression, and he leaped to the side, just managing to save himself.

“Tch! We know, since we ate you, but you really don’t hesitate, do you, Emilia?! If you attack like that, people will think you’re scary…”

“Just be quiet! You should know I’m used to people thinking I’m scary! The important thing is what I think about everyone! And…”

Gluttony slipped past the ice only to have Emilia’s white knee right in his face. Blocking it with his arm, Gluttony was blown backward, and Emilia glanced at Subaru for a single moment.

“The person I want to remember me the most hasn’t forgotten who I am. Right now, I’m *really* fired up!”

“This is why the ones who act on emotion are awkward to deal with. They’re always the most trouble.”

“—Is that how it is? However, I am in agreement with her.”

Gluttony’s expression twisted in irritation when Julius slipped behind him. The downward slash he unleashed was caught by an arm that Gluttony immediately swung backward.

However, an incomplete block couldn’t completely stop the blade, and it bit deep. The cut reached his elbow, spilling blood. Gluttony groaned, even as the next attack followed—

“—Forgotten by everyone, I lost sight of where I belong and even felt that my very existence had been negated. But there was never any need for me to doubt where I stood.” Putting his quiet resolve into words, Julius increased the keenness of his attacks.

“Tch! Ugh, gah!”

Gluttony couldn’t match their speed or intensity, and when one landed solidly on his chest, he let out a cry.

Julius and Emilia continued their furious assault, steadily cornering Gluttony. *I would love to finish things in one quick push here…*

“Subaru, even if we tried to intervene…”

“…I know. I can’t do anything in that mix.”

“…As long as you understand.”

It was frustrating, but that was reality. With his skills, he couldn’t contribute in a battle between transcendent fighters. That was still true even with Beatrice’s support. So he could do nothing but watch.

Emilia and Julius were taking down Gluttony. Then…

“Icebrand Arts.”

It was the second time he had heard that attack’s name, but this time, the one who said it didn’t have a silvery voice.

Gluttony was bleeding, but he was still composed, and that smirk never left his face. He had been the one to call out that attack name. An instant later, an ice spear thrust upward from below Gluttony’s feet. Julius cartwheeled to avoid it, while Emilia turned her spear into a hammer of ice and shattered the icicle with brute strength.

Even though the surprise attack had been blocked, the shock it brought didn’t disappear.

“That was my—”

“Ha-ha! How does it feel getting a taste of your own special attack?! How is it, how do you like it, how’s it feel, how?! Eat it all! Gluttony!”

Before Emilia could even get the words out, Gluttony drew another weapon of ice from the floor. The shape of it left Emilia and Julius confused, and left Subaru mind-boggled.

Because it was—

“A…a pile bunker?!”

“Icebrand Arts itself is Emilia’s technique, but the one using it is us, who have eaten you, mister! Knowledge is a weapon! We’re a high-IQ Archbishop, after all!”

Gluttony turned the weapon from another world on Emilia and Julius.

There was an explosion, and a stake shot out, violently forcing both of them to back away.

“Aaaahhh!”

“Sorasorasorasora, go, go, gogogogogogogo!!!”

Laughing loudly, Gluttony summoned weapon after weapon that didn’t exist in this world. Emilia and Julius caught themselves and got back in position to fight, but the change wasn’t just in Gluttony’s weapons.

He freely adapted his fighting style to the weapons, forcing Emilia and Julius onto the back foot.

“His movements…can change this much?!”

Julius’s shock was an expression of just how terrifying Gluttony could be in adapting other people’s memories.

Emilia’s technique that created weapons out of ice, combined with Subaru’s otherworldly knowledge—that gave birth to infinite possibilities.

On top of that, Gluttony had probably absorbed the lives of many warriors, effectively installing the fighting power of countless martial artists without any load times.

Because of that, just by pulling out the most effective memory from his stock, he could immediately become an expert with any weapon, freely blending offense and defense.

And there was another reason why things were looking bad for them.

“Julius! Not there!”

“Ngh…”

Julius stumbled as Emilia cried out.

Even though they both wanted to defeat the enemy more than anything, their teamwork was clumsy.

Their fighting styles were poorly suited to each other. Emilia's style relied on intuition, while Julius was a schooled fighter who had honed his skills with endless training. Of course, if they at least knew each other's habits, it would have been relatively simple to adjust, but…

"How unfortunate. Did you really think you could work together? Knowing someone and trusting them run along the same lines, but they're totally different things. Because you don't know each other's thoughts, there's no unity. Because you don't know each other's habits, you can't adapt your moves. And then you crash into each other and get in each other's way… Ha-ha, that's no good at all, you two!"

"Ngh…"

"Knowledge is power! Memories are bonds! By sacrificing memories, we grow stronger! Spreading our wings, flying high, and going wherever we want!"

Leaping up, Gluttony hit both of them with kicks at the same time.

His frame was small, and his legs were not particularly long, but his soles landed solid hits on both of their shoulders, sending them flying.

"Dangerous! Saucy! A hard fight! What do you think of what we've got?! And the mister who's just watching over there, are you satisfied just feeling frustrated on the sidelines?"

"You…"

"You talked a big game about not forgetting, but how much will that actually help? In the end, experience tells the tale. Gathering superior knowledge grants abundance to life and sets people apart as winners. In other words, we're the greatest!"

Spreading his hands and baring his fangs, Gluttony sneered while his words tore into them.

So that's his philosophy? It's a bit different from what Louis talked about, but the essence is the same. They use other people's lives as stepping stones and gorge themselves. Just the worst stuff.

From the bottom of his heart, he thought it was a loathsome—

"What are you gettin' cocky about?"

"…Huh?"

Gluttony had been laughing like the whole world was his oyster, but the moment he heard that voice, his eyes went wide. Subaru and the others were no less surprised.

A titan of carnage had suddenly broken into the space, like it was the natural thing to do.

There was a crunch beneath his sandals as the towering red-haired man stepped onto the ice. Appearing from the other side of the passage, he hemmed Gluttony in with a ferocious smile on his face.

“The greatest ain’t some twisted little brat like you. The greatest and the strongest, the highest and the best—those are all words that exist for me.”

The man who shouldn’t have been able to descend from the second floor stood there with the grin of a villain.

4

“_____”

Reid Astrea appeared before them with a commanding presence. His sharp blue eyes paid no heed to anyone’s shock at his arrival. His bearing alone left everyone, even Gluttony, speechless.

“What’s with the stupid faces. It’s obvious I’d be here, ain’t it?”

Reid tapped the patch over his left eye and tapped the floor with his sandal.

“It’s gotten so noisy outside and insane that I can’t nap in peace. And there ain’t any booze, either, so it’s boring as hell. There’s no way I can take that.”

“…Sucks for you, then. We’re kind of busy here. Shouldn’t be that hard to see.”

“Hah! What are you spouting, small fry? Sorry, your voice is too quiet. I can’t hear you. Well, not like it’d matter if I heard it or not.”

“Stubborn ass…”

It wasn’t just that. The timing was bad, too.

Subaru’s shout had been weak, not forceful enough to be a real objection. And silenced by that merciless, rough comeback, he clenched his fists, acknowledging he was scared of Reid.

Now that he had come face-to-face with Reid, his soul was trembling. But not out of fear and terror. It was trembling with excitement.

“Deep down, I’ve already acknowledged you as my enemy…”

“Heh. Not bad, small fry. I still ain’t promoting you past small fry, but I’ll give you credit for not mistakin’ me as some convenient reinforcements.”

“Not like I’d just believe you even if you did say you’re here to help.”

“Hah! Listen to the kid go.”

Subaru hid the cold feeling he had in his heart as Reid grinned like a sinister shark.

In one sense, his announcement just now was despair-inducing. But Subaru had never counted on Reid as an ally. That would’ve been a mistake, and the man himself had just confirmed it.

Gluttony had immediately returned to his senses, and as their exchange ended, he spoke.

“—Hey, Reid Astrea.”

The Archbishop of Gluttony was standing right in the middle of the frozen hall—right between both sides. Reid snorted in annoyance.

“Yeah, what is it, kid? …You’re a dirty little rug rat, aren’t you. What is it?”

“You’re the first-generation Sword Saint, right? So how are you here? From our memories, as the examiner you shouldn’t be able to come down the stairs.”

Gluttony ignored the insult and questioned Reid.

It pissed Subaru off that the memories he was talking about were clearly his own, but everyone there had the same question.

It had happened in the last loop, too, but Subaru still had no clue why Reid, who was supposed to be the examiner for the second floor, was roaming freely around the tower. He didn’t want to think it was simply because Reid was that irrepressible…

“Is there some odd trick, or have the tower’s rules themselves changed? Either way, you being here is outside the plan, so we’ll have to rearrange the courses now. Appetizers first, then the main, and then dessert is standard, right?”

“Blah, blah, blah. Quit spewin’ that babble, you little shit.”

“———”

“I can’t come down? Peel your eyes and take a good look. The hell are you saying? You can see the truth right in front of you.”

Reid leaned forward in annoyance. The way his white teeth flashed, the way he glared at Gluttony with his one eye—the man

was a thug.

But unfortunately, the pressure he unleashed was nothing like that of a simple street tough loitering outside a convenience store. It already made Subaru feel like his life was in danger.

It was like a beast that blended a tiger, a bear, a lion, and a dragon in one body had shown up.

Reid bristled with an aura that threatened every possible sort of violence as he bared his fangs.

“Screw you. I do what I want, how I want. I don’t take orders from no one. This ain’t some joke. And who the shit gave you permission to start flappin’ your jaw, huh? Tell me. I dare ya.”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha. Wow, this is amazing. There’s no point in talking to you.”

Turning the holy sword of ice in his hand into fragments of ice, Gluttony pushed back his long bangs.

Even Gluttony had trouble dealing with someone who so adamantly refused to interact in any meaningful way. He had seemed to be struggling to deal with Emilia’s lack of interest in discussion, but Reid was orders of magnitude worse.

“But…you’re first-rate as prey. As Gourmet, our appetite is throbbing! Bite it! Gnaw it! Slurp it all up! Taste it! Eat it all! Gluttony!”

Howling and raging, Gluttony got on all fours and stared at Reid across the frozen floor.

His long tongue poked out past his white canines, dripping drool. He was thrall to an appetite for consuming others’ memories that no normal person could hope to comprehend.

“—Archbishop of Gluttony, Lye Batenkaitos.”

Was it pride or arrogance? Either way, Gluttony—no, Lye Batenkaitos—introduced himself, and the next instant, he launched himself off the icy floor and shot forward like an arrow.

His feral sprint felt almost like a ferocious four-legged beast on the hunt.

“What a pain in my ass.”

Watching Batenkaitos charge from head-on, Reid poked a finger in his ear, sounding bored.

“—Thanks for the meal!”

“If a hot babe was sayin’ it, that’d be one thing, but no one wants to hear that comin’ outta you.”

In an instant, Batenkaitos, who approached with his mouth

wide open, violently shifted to the side.

Reid's right foot was sticking out haphazardly, his kick catching Batenkaitos right in the torso, slamming him straight into the wall with terrific force.

"Gheh…"

"Keep that strangled chicken croak to yourself. At least when you strangle a chicken the meat tastes good, but you're not even food. Whatever that crap about gluttony was about."

"Giiagh!"

"You're the one jumpin' at a grown man. You better be ready for an ass-kickin'!"

Reid's leg pushed Batenkaitos's body against the wall, and he started running down the icy passage at a speed unbelievable for someone doing it on a single leg.

Of course, Batenkaitos couldn't do anything to resist as he got dragged along the uneven surface of the ice. The damage must have been massive. Just devastating.

"Giigaaaaaaa!"

"Oy, oy, don't start whining after this much. If that's all it takes, then what's the point? It ain't over yet. In my day, this wouldn't even count as child's play. Kids these days aren't just dirty. They ain't got no substance, neither. Oy, you listening?!"

Sounding bored, Reid stopped moving and quickly turned around.

A backward spinning kick with his left leg slammed home forcefully into Batenkaitos's side, sending his small frame blasting away like a rubber ball.

He bounced against the floor at an absurd speed, unable to stop himself. Spinning at high speed and spraying blood, the Archbishop passed between Emilia and Julius, past Subaru and Beatrice, and rolled farther down the passage.

There was no trace of his energy from moments before as he lay sprawled out, facedown on the floor.

Is he…dead?

"He was a powerful enemy, right…? Even fighting together, Emilia-chan and Julius were struggling…right?"

"…Correct. But that is just how beyond any scale that man is, I suppose. You could also say the situation has gotten even worse."

Beatrice's hand clutched Subaru's. Instead of being afraid of Batenkaitos, who had fallen and had gone still, she was wary of

Reid, who stood in front of them. Emilia and Julius were the same.

This battle wasn't a fight against Gluttony anymore; it was becoming a battle against a new, even stronger enemy.

Despite being in the middle of that—

"Thank you *very* much for taking care of that boy… Can we maybe be friends?"

Emilia tried a friendly approach with Reid. He shook his head in response to the peaceful request that was just like her, and then he shrugged and kicked the floor.

Brushing off her request completely, Reid scratched his head and heaved a sigh.

"Hahhh, don't go sayin' crap like that… Actually, what are you, even? You're way too hot. What the hell? You're a straight-up babe! What are you doin' in this shithole? Why are you here? Quit playin' around in this crazy sandbox and drink with me tonight."

"Ummm, this is the second time…"

"Unfortunately, she will be unable to accompany you for a drink this evening."

"Oh?"

"There shall be no tranquil night for a phantom such as yourself."

Interrupting his crude ramble, a man with a knight's sword at the ready stepped forward. Julius Juukulius faced off against Reid, as if protecting Emilia. His eyes were sharp, and his sword was ready for action.

Looking right into those yellow eyes, Reid showed a slight change in his expression.

"…Ho-ho. Your face's gotten a tiny bit better. Something good happen? A woman? It was a woman, wasn't it?"

"I won't deny that several things happened that affected my mindset. However, if a woman's embrace can heal a wounded heart, then a friend's merciless words can be just as good."

"I see you're still a wordy bastard. Spit it out already."

"The reason I am standing here with my sword in hand is thanks to my friend—!"

As he said that, Julius advanced while swinging his blade upward, tracing an unbelievably beautiful arc with the tip of his blade as he unleashed an attack aimed directly at Reid's neck.

"_____"

It was the optimal choice. Given Reid's calm, composed

demeanor, trying to take him down immediately was definitely the correct choice for defeating the first-generation Sword Saint.

The problem was…

"Do you understand what calm and composed means? It means never losing control, no matter what happens. It means tricks don't mean anything. It means you're an idiot."

…Reid caught Julius's preemptive attack with the two chopsticks in his hands.

It was an absurd technique, almost like the reenactment of a story about Miyamoto Musashi.

No, even Miyamoto Musashi didn't stop an opponent's sword with nothing but chopsticks.

"Ngrgh…"

"Well, it wasn't bad, I guess. Anyone other than me would've bought the farm. Welp, let's go."

Reid grinned like a shark at Julius. And then, with one chopstick in each hand, he stepped forward while brushing aside the tip of the sword and unleashing an attack. The impact hit the side of the knight's sword with a loud crack.

"_____"

The short, wooden stick was incomparable to a sword, but in the hand of a master like Reid, it became a lethal weapon far greater than its size implied, sowing destruction wherever it went.

Right after the ferocious crack, the resulting shock wave blasted Julius's hair and clothes, shattering all the frozen ice coating the passage.

It was completely absurd. Utterly unreasonable. It wouldn't be wrong to call it a glitch in real life.

Despite seeing it before, Subaru was still speechless and struck again by a stark realization…

A monster like this existed in this world, and they had to overcome it if they wanted to clear the tower. The malicious nature of the person who designed this damned place made Subaru sick to his stomach.

"—Heh, I'm actually a little impressed."

It was hard to say how much of Reid's full power was contained in that one attack. But he apparently had not expected Julius to be able to withstand it, and he even complimented Julius for managing to redirect it with his whole body.

A drop of blood trickled from the corner of Julius's mouth as

his eyes narrowed.

"As it happens, I have to win against you, or our calculations will be ruined."

"You wanna win? Listen to you talkin' big."

"Indeed. However, I shall have you accompany me!"

Julius's sword flashed, but Reid's two chopsticks wildly deflected it.

As his sword's momentum got diverted, Julius's stance…didn't waver. He spun as if even that parry had been woven into his calculation, unleashing the next attack without any hesitation. He followed up with more, chaining the attacks together seamlessly.

It was an elegant, practiced blade dance that flowed without a single wasted movement.

If Reid's sword was like a roaring flame, then Julius's was like running water.

In simple affinity, water would extinguish fire, but if the flames were strong enough, then it was more like a burning stone that could boil away the water, rendering it meaningless.

Most likely, many, many flowing water swordsmen had been evaporated by Reid's blazing force. But in this moment, Julius showed no fear as he continued his unwavering attack against Reid.

"Don't think Julius is the only one here!"

"Hah! I didn't forget you, hotness! Your face is too good to forget!"

"Thank you for the compliment! But there's only one person who really remembers me!"

Emilia joined Julius's blade dance with an armory full of ice weapons.

Because of that, Reid pointed one chopstick at Julius and the other at Emilia. His swordsmanship shattered any pedestrian questions about whether that would be enough to keep them at bay.

A chill frost descended upon the sword dance composed of flowing water and raging flame, vividly transforming the battlefield.

There had only been a single change of cast, switching Reid out for Batenkaitos as the prime antagonist, but Emilia and Julius's awkward teamwork started to find links. In fact, even that was changing.

Maybe because the enemy was stronger, or maybe because they had adjusted their fighting styles in an impossibly short amount of

time, but their breathing was starting to sync up, and the initially unsteady coordination was becoming more and more certain.

"Julius is matching Emilia."

"You can tell?"

"It's a matter of personality, too. Emilia is moving decisively, and Julius is moving more like himself. It makes sense for Emilia to stop trying to match him."

"That's them, all right."

If that was what it took to make it work, then that was the right choice.

In the end, letting go of everything and going at her own pace was Emilia's style. Meanwhile, Julius was obviously skilled at aligning himself with other people's movements and still maximizing what his skills brought to the table.

"Ha-ha! Nice, nice! This is startin' to get fun for me!"

"Uyah! Seiyah! Toryah! Urya, urya, urya!"

Reid burst into laughter, enjoying himself as he matched their improving teamwork with force. Emilia's silly shouts were accompanied by unbelievably deadly attacks, but there was no decisive blow.

Water and fire and ice intertwined beautifully in a mystical ballet of violence.

It was so beautiful, someone might mistake this for a real dance.

"—Shaaaaaa!"

And so the intrusion of dissonance stood out immediately.

"You…!"

Lye Batenkaitos rudely crashed into their dance. The boy who had been struck by Reid's kick and who had tumbled away on the verge of death rejoined the battle as if nothing had happened.

Batenkaitos swung the blades attached to his wrists, using his short arms and legs to lash out at the three of them with a flurry of lethal attacks.

Emilia and Julius and Reid all defended in annoyance.

"You do not know when to give up, Archbishop!"

"Ha-ha-ha! Leaving us out of the fun, don't be so mean, brother dearest! Always, always keeping things to yourself? Don't be so stingy!"

"Reid! You can see, right?! There's no point in us fighting here! Can you help us? Or at least be patient and wait?!"

“You just don’t get it, do you, hotness? I’m havin’ fun right now. I wouldn’t change my mind even if the stars fell out of the sky!”

The four of them traded blows as they crashed their determination into each other.

It was a battle soaked in blood. This was not something to approach lightly, and there was no simple or obvious point of compromise.

It was hard to tell from the sidelines who had the upper hand and who was at a disadvantage, who was winning and who was getting pushed back.

All he could do was at least pray for his friends’ victory.

“—!”

“Subaru?!”

Unable to do anything but watch in frustration from the sidelines, Subaru clutched his chest and fell to his knees. Taken aback, Beatrice touched his shoulder and looked into his face as he stared down, breathing painfully.

“Subaru, Subaru! What is it? What happened?!”

“…No, what is…this?”

“Subaru?”

Subaru clutched his chest and blinked over and over as Beatrice desperately called out to him.

There was no point in trying to hide it or dodge the question. But Subaru didn’t know what it was, either. It was strange. Something was off. There was an unbelievable heat coming from inside his chest.

His heart raced until it felt like it might explode. Every drop of blood in his body seemed to be pleading, as a bright red warning bell rang in his head. A terrifying feeling that he couldn’t bear was coursing through him.

“_____”

He didn’t know what was going on with his body.

This isn’t something that has happened in any of the loops. Is it some kind of sickness? Or is there some sort of magical interference?

Using what little intelligence he could muster, he considered the worst possibility and then shook his head.

No, this probably isn’t a bad thing. The alarm is just telling me something’s changed.

“Haaah…”

He exhaled slowly.

What had seared his mind just now wasn't only concern for Emilia and Julius as they fought Reid and Batenkaitos.

He had been powerless to do anything besides stand there and watch.

What seared his mind were the two remaining obstacles that were, in all likelihood, approaching even now.

While Emilia and Julius were fighting so hard in front of him, the moment he considered the possibility of the tower still being destroyed, his pulse started racing, and he had to take a knee.

He could feel his heart pounding in his chest.

The sound resonated in his mind as he slowly breathed and closed his eyes. That just felt *right*. Obeying that feeling, he kept his eyes closed.

"_____"

Seeing Subaru move with such deliberateness, Beatrice stopped calling to him.

She couldn't have possibly known what was happening. Even so, she held fast. Subaru was blessed to have such understanding comrades.

And behind his eyelids, he felt something strange emerging.

—An oh-so-faint light looming in the indistinct darkness.

"—?"

Faint, warm, glowing lights.

There was one right beside Subaru, and two more in front of him, a short distance away. And mysteriously, even though he didn't turn around, he could tell there were some behind him, too.

Behind him, there were four lights, all bundled together. And then one more even farther away. And, and, and—

—He could tell one more was approaching from above.

"—Beatrice!"

"Hyah!"

For some reason, Subaru trusted that feeling completely, leaping at Beatrice before bounding away.

Light. Holding her in his arms, Subaru rolled across the stone floor without a moment's pause.

—The next instant, he felt a burning heat graze his right thigh.

"Gah, guooooo!"

He immediately recognized that the heat came from the wound to his leg. Most likely, he was intentionally distracting himself from

the fact that his leg had been badly gouged. He spun around while holding Beatrice, and opening his eyes as pain and tears blurred his vision, he saw it.

"I figured you'd be coming, you damn scorpion…!"

Subaru spat those words at the giant scorpion that appeared before him for a second time—the scorpion with a black carapace and eyes like red lights crawled along the wall with its multiple legs, glaring down at them.

"—Ah."

Beatrice's eyes widened when she saw its large, ominous form.

Her eyes focused on the scorpion's pincer that had left such a deep furrow in Subaru's leg. The scorpion's pincer tip had a nasty chunk of Subaru's flesh in it, and blood streamed out, dripping onto the floor.

This was the giant scorpion's intrusion that he had been worried about.

The obstacles they had to overcome were all gathering in one place.

"_____"

Understanding how bad the situation was, Subaru's mind burned red hot with pain as he raced to find some way out.

But he couldn't figure out how he could change the world in a way that would resolve this.

Batenkaitos was here, Reid was here, and even the giant scorpion had joined the party.

Even if Meili and Shaula were keeping the swarm of demon beasts at bay, Subaru was out of moves.

This isn't good.

This won't work. There has to be another—

"Subaru!" "Subaru!" "Subaru!!!"

He heard three people calling as he ground his teeth.

Beatrice's sorrowful voice, Julius's strained voice, Emilia's plea —he could hear them all.

Batenkaitos, Reid, and the giant scorpion were all on the move.

They would cut off every avenue. However, before that could happen—

A thunderous roar shook the tower violently.

The crumbling floor caused his body to bounce, blew Emilia and the others fighting away, and even crushed the giant scorpion's carapace. It was like the entire world was collapsing.

The small girl hugged him, as if to protect Subaru. Hugging her soft body, Subaru opened his eyes in the middle of the blast.

"—I love you."

—The darkness that held only a blind love swallowed Subaru.

5

—The next instant, feeling a jolt, as if black and white, light and dark, man and woman, love and hate… Everything had been turned on its head as Subaru Natsuki was transmigrated.

"—Subaru."

A call, and as if drawing it toward himself, Subaru wrapped the owner of the voice in a hug.

"Uhyaan!"

There was a sudden cry and a struggling body in his arms, looking up at his face. It was—

"Bea…trice…"

"Th-that's right! Don't surprise Betty like that. I'm not saying I dislike it. I was just worried, since you just came back from the book… But it is a relief that you said Betty's name first."

"_____"

Beatrice murmured softly from inside his arms. Hearing her voice, Subaru looked around himself.

What happened? I was on the ground in the hall just a moment ago. My leg was hurt, and then that dark, dark, shadow…

"…The archive?"

"For now, will you let us at least confirm whether you're still there or not, Natsuki?"

Surrounded by shelves and shelves of books, Subaru was looking around dumbfounded when he heard another voice.

Looking over, he saw Echidna smiling awkwardly as she brushed her light purple hair. Behind her, leaning against a bookshelf and resting her head in her hands, was Meili.

"You finally woke up."

"Wha?! Wha-wha?! Subaru?! What is it, Subaru?! Has something happened? Can you tell us what you saw in the book?" Beatrice was flying into a panic.

“Ahhh, no, right. I…need to do that, too, but first…”

Subaru hugged Beatrice’s tiny body, savoring the warmth.

And then he acknowledged the reality that he had no choice but to face.

—I came back…to this point in time.

Having messed up clearing the five obstacles, Subaru had returned to this moment.

CHAPTER 5

AN UNREASONABLE SWORD'S JUDGMENT

1

—The first thing he had to do was really come to grips with the fact that he had died and returned.

They had failed to deal with the Pleiades Watchtower's five obstacles in time, and in the end, that terrifying black shadow had destroyed everything in the heart of the tower.

And in dying there, Subaru gained a chance to redo things—but this time was completely different from the other loops.

"…The checkpoint is different."

His fifth death. In and of itself, that was something worth grieving over, but the biggest problem was the new reset point. It had been updated to right after he returned from Reid's book of the dead. From the corridors of memory.

"_____"

He had expected this.

The Subaru Natsuki before he lost his memories must have used his Return by Death ability in the same sort of way. So the starting point being right after he had lost his memories obviously stood out. Unless the save point updated somehow, the current Subaru couldn't have restarted from the green room.

So the starting point updating itself wasn't a surprise. But…

"I was brought back right before the worst moment, with basically no time to prepare anything…!"

By the time he had returned from the corridors of memory, the major obstacles were already in motion—the faint rumble he could feel from the floor was proof of the demon beast stampede approaching the tower.

His time limit was tight.

The demon beast stampede, Reid Astrea, the mysterious giant scorpion, the two Gluttonies, and the brutal shadow that swallowed up the tower. And time's running out. There's no time, no time, no—

"—Will you calm down, I wonder?!"

"Aiyah!"

Subaru was digging himself deeper and deeper into a pit of worry, but a forceful smack brought him back to his senses. Beatrice squeezed his cheeks between her hands and looked straight at him with her big, round eyes.

Pressing against him, close enough he could feel her breath.

"Tell Betty what happened in the book, Subaru. Talk to Betty, and we'll think of something together… That's our strength."

"_____"

Beatrice's words helped him clear his mind of the panic and regret that threatened to consume him.

And as he regained a semblance of calm, the enemies that lay past the panic and regret came into view. At the same time, he realized how shameful he must seem.

And then he remembered the scolding that spurred him on when he was at a standstill just a short while ago…

"Right, time to stand up."

"Eh?" Beatrice's eyes widened.

"Nothing, I was just reminded again how stupid I am and how little progress I've made."

Holding on to Beatrice, Subaru rose to his feet.

Echidna and Meili are here, too, and I generally know what the others are doing. I have a good idea what kind of mess they're probably in, too.

"I'll keep it short. I couldn't see Reid's memories in the book of the dead. Something got in my way. The book is connected to some Odo Ragna thing, and I ran into a troublesome person there."

All three pairs of eyes widened in shock as he quickly explained everything.

Apologizing mentally for not giving them any time to process these revelations, Subaru moved to the most important bit.

"The Archbishop of Gluttony, Louis Arneb, declared war on us."

“Another Archbishop? Even all the way out here at the eastern edge of the map? Looks like there’s some bond between you and them you just can’t escape,” Echidna joked, once Subaru finished his explanation.

From how she said it, it sounded like the Gluttonies weren’t the only ones he had a connection with. There were probably seven Archbishops total. He wanted to believe this was the worst of the lot, but…

“Let’s save lamenting all the bad relations that linger around Subaru for later. What we need now is…”

“Yeah, first up is supporting Shaula. Meili, can we count on you?”

Finishing Julius’s thought, Subaru entrusted Meili to cooperate with Shaula and deal with the stampede of demon beasts outside the tower.

Julius had come back to the third floor to report the problem just as they were quickly finishing up their discussion. Knowing that the swarm of monsters was the reason for Julius’s concern, Meili had an impish smile on her face when Subaru turned to her.

“Ohhh? After that big talk, you’re just dumping work in my lap? But you were at least honest about it, so you can leave it to me. Be grateful.”

“Of course, I’m super grateful! I love you!”

“So cheap…”

Evidently annoyed by his confession, Meili still agreed to take care of the demon beasts. She was acting like she didn’t really want to do it, but that was just her hiding her embarrassment. Any doubts about that would’ve disappeared the moment anyone saw how fast she rushed toward the hidden balcony.

One down, four to go…

“Subaru, you must have something in mind if you sent Miss Meili alone.”

“You’re quick on the uptake. I said Gluttony was coming, right?”

“…Yes, you said that one of several Gluttonies stole your memories last night. In which case, I trust you are going to give me a chance to avenge myself.”

Julius’s voice was low as he touched the sword on his hip.

It was true that his strength was needed, and he desperately needed to vindicate himself as well.

—But Gluttony wasn't the enemy Subaru wanted him to fight.

"That's right, I want you to get revenge, but not on Gluttony."

"What? But in this situation, there isn't an opponent more important than—"

"Reid is coming down. I want you to stop him from butting in."

"_____"

Julius's brow furrowed in shock when he heard that name.

In a certain sense, it was Julius's fate to fight Reid, even when Gluttony was lurking about. His opponent was a being who broke every mold and was going to do something that shouldn't have been possible.

"In this chaotic situation, he would do the number one thing we don't want. Betty agrees, if that thing comes out, everything will be for naught."

"I agree, too. But it's hard to believe he can just go for a stroll around the tower…or rather, I really don't want to believe it. Natsuki, did you get that from…?"

"…Yeah, I heard it from Gluttony."

After a moment's hesitation, Subaru confidently lied.

In actuality, Reid's movement probably wasn't connected to Gluttony. That much was clear from the fact they had both clashed and from how he had completely wrecked Batenkaitos.

The lie was Subaru's desperate attempt to convince his friends to believe his information without revealing the fact that he had seen this all before. He was certain he couldn't let them know about Return by Death…even if he couldn't explain exactly why.

"_____"

"Julius, I'm reluctant to move you away from the threat we can see, only to chase after a potential threat. But we can't just ignore what Natsuki is saying."

Echidna agreed that they had to be wary of Reid while Subaru felt a tug at his heartstrings. Hearing her conclusion, Julius nodded.

"I understand. I wouldn't be so foolish as to doubt Subaru's words now of all times. If I'm being honest, it is incredibly frustrating not to be the one who will defeat detestable Gluttony. However…"

Julius's yellow eyes focused on Subaru, who nodded deeply, acknowledging the knight's resolve.

"Like I said before, you're the only one we can count on to deal with Reid Astrea."

"…If I don't win, our calculations will go awry, eh? What an irredeemable argument."

If everything didn't go as planned, their failure would lead directly to a massive tragedy.

Sensing that in Subaru's serious black eyes, Julius heaved a deep sigh.

"You have my word. I will handle Reid. However, if it turns out that he cannot move from the second floor, I shall come to where you are at once. Any objection?"

"Nope. If Reid can't come out for a stroll, then that frees you up. I couldn't ask for anything better. I'll let you be the judge of that, but beating Reid is your role."

"Then we have an understanding. Echidna, Lady Beatrice, I'll leave the rest to you."

"Do me the favor of including my name, at least, come on…"

Subaru grimaced at being left out, but Julius simply flashed a pompous smile. Then, with a flutter of his cape, he headed toward the second floor.

After watching him go, Subaru turned around, only to be met by a sudden whisper.

"I won't ask how you can be so sure. So long as you don't betray his trust or mine."

Subaru gulped slightly at Echidna's words.

As pragmatic as she was, it was only natural she would doubt how he could possibly know with such certainty that the Sword Saint would start roaming around the tower. Especially when there was so little connection between Gluttony and Reid.

The only reason she hadn't burst his bubble in front of Julius was because she placed some level of trust in Subaru based on what he had done so far.

I have to live up to that trust.

"—!"

When his mind got that far, he felt a stinging heat in his chest.

It was the same strange heat that he had felt just before the shadow had swallowed him at the end of the last loop. His pulse started racing, and he closed his eyes as the impatience swelled inside him.

What appeared behind his eyelids were faint, pale lights—in his arms, right beside him, and here and there in the distance down the passage.

“Subaru?”

“…I’m okay. We need to get to Emilia-chan and Ram! Let’s hurry!”

Beatrice peered at Subaru’s face as it tensed. Shaking his head, Subaru took her hand and started running to meet up with the others.

—No, more precisely, it wasn’t to meet up with Emilia.

Because at this point, it wasn’t Emilia they would run into down this passage, but—

“Barusu! You’re awake!”

“Ram!”

What appeared around the corner was the same group as last time—Ram holding onto Rem while riding Patlash. She dismounted with a flourish and tossed the reins to Subaru.

“You’re too slow! Take care of Rem! If she’s hurt, or if you touch her in any strange way, I won’t forgive you, so protect her like your life depends on it. I—”

“Wait, wait, wait! Too fast! I get why, but calm down! You—”

“The Archbishop of Gluttony is here! Lady Emilia is fighting, but she’s at a disadvantage. I have to get back at once, or it will be too late!”

“_____”

The emotions that Subaru felt in that moment were complicated.

Concern for Ram, who was going to fight, anger at the confirmation that the foul Batenkaitos had arrived—and above all, relief that Ram had said Emilia’s name.

The biggest reasons he had been hurrying were to prevent Batenkaitos from eating Emilia’s name and to keep Ram from dropping out of the fight because of that.

Getting confirmation that he had made it in time, Subaru took the offered reins and pushed them into Echidna’s hands.

“Echidna! Get Rem and Patlash to a safe area! The balcony and second floor are no good! You can’t get to the green room now. Taygeta’s probably the best choice!”

“Natsuki?! What about you?”

“Me and Beatrice are going with Ram!”

Echidna’s eyes widened as Subaru fired off directions. He quickly rubbed Patlash’s neck and seared Rem into his eyes.

“You said it before. Don’t betray your trust, right? I’m asking

you the same thing. Take care of Rem. She's vital for *Subaru Natsuki*."

"…That's a weird thing to say. You're Subaru Natsuki, aren't you?"

"…I have a little hope that you can maybe understand a bit of what I'm feeling."

From what he had heard, Subaru had gathered that Echidna was inhabiting a body temporarily, but her goal was to return it to its original owner. In a sense, that was similar to the connection between the current Subaru and Subaru Natsuki.

Echidna's eyes widened.

"Natsuki, are you…?"

"I'm counting on you."

Not letting her finish, Subaru started running.

He only had Beatrice, who was determined not to let him be alone, and Ram, who had started running first. Ram glanced back.

"Why are you coming, Barusu? Rem is—"

"Rem told me to go take care of things instead of just worrying about her! She gave me a lecture inside the book!"

"—! Rem *what*? What are you talking about?"

Ram's pink eyes quivered at the news as Subaru ran alongside her. But there was no time to get into the weeds about what happened in the corridors of memory.

So he simply told her the most important part.

"Rem told me to fight and take everything back. So that's what I'm going to do!"

"Of course, don't forget Betty is here, too."

"…That's enough for now. I will cross-examine you a hundred times over later."

"A hundred times?!"

Subaru shuddered. When Ram said that, it didn't sound like a joke. But since he couldn't explain anything right now, maybe that response was a sign of her benevolence.

It was also proof that they were in a situation dangerous enough that she couldn't press him for details.

"—Icebrand Arts!"

The next instant, down the white, frosted-over passage, he spotted Emilia's back as she danced with weapons of ice in her hands. She was facing off against the small Archbishop, Lye Batenkaitos—

“Lady Emilia!”

Ram’s shout was a final confirmation to Subaru that they had avoided the worst-case scenario. At the same time, Emilia noticed them when her name was called.

“Eh?! Ram?! Why did you come back?! And Subaru and Beatrice! I’m glad you’re safe, but it’s *really* dangerous! Get away! Leave!”

“Rem has been moved to a safe location. Now I may assist you.”

Ram pulled the small wand strapped to her thigh while answering Emilia.

It was a short wand, sort of like what a wizard would have. At a glance, it looked entirely normal, but when Ram held it, it suddenly felt powerful.

Seeing Ram intended to join the fight, Gluttony sneered while putting some distance between him and Emilia.

“Ha-ha! What, what? You came back, Sister! Ooh, so dashing! Why are you so cool, Sister? You’re so wonderful!”

“—Silence. I’ll kill you, Archbishop.”

Her voice was dripping with raw hostility as Ram advanced on Batenkaitos. Subaru immediately reached for her back.

“Hey!”

It was clear from the last loop that Gluttony was incredibly powerful, able to match Emilia and Julius blow for blow. If Ram lost control here, they would end up losing the advantage they had gained from safeguarding Emilia’s name.

Worrying about that possibility, he tried to grab Ram’s shoulder, but—

“—Who do you think you are talking to, Barusu? Fall back at once.”

His fingers touched nothing but air as Ram disappeared.

“Whoa?!”

In a flash, Ram reappeared directly in front of Batenkaitos.

Seeing the wand thrust at his forehead, Batenkaitos widened his eyes, and he shouted rapturously as he crossed the swords on his arms to catch the imminent blow.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha. Are you serious?! Creating wind beneath your feet? You’re lucky you didn’t blow your legs off. Most people would be too scared to try that!”

“Don’t use such a pointless standard to judge me.”

“—?!”

“Also, you thought this would be the end? You’ve underestimated my anger.”

Ram’s eyes narrowed. A blade of wind flew from the tip of the wand.

Expecting that, Batenkaitos twisted his body, but he didn’t make it in time. The blade of wind cut through everything in its path, tearing into Gluttony’s evil countenance.

“Gih, gaaaaa!!!!”

Batenkaitos cried out as the left side of his face was torn open. He pushed Ram back with a desperate kick. Unfortunately for him, even that had been accounted for.

“I’m here, too!”

Emilia rushed at Batenkaitos from behind, wielding a greatsword made of ice. Because Ram had been pushed away, Emilia didn’t have to hold back.

Even if it wasn’t a sharp sword, an attack with enough force to knock Batenkaitos out of the fight in one blow was hurtling downward—

“—Ultimate Palm”

“Kyah?!”

A black fist shattered the ice sword mid-swing, like it was made of glass.

The unexpected destruction ruined Emilia’s balance, and Gluttony’s hind leg swept her pivot foot out from under her, sending her spinning with a cry as his fingernails thrust toward her face.

Just as the cutest face in the world was on the verge of being mauled—

“Lady Emilia’s face is one of her few traits that is completely flawless.”

Ram’s foot stomped down on his claws, and then her left elbow sent Batenkaitos flying while Emilia quickly recovered by extending her right hand.

“Wah, whoops…! Thank you, Ram! I almost bumped my head on the ground there.”

“Please be careful, Lady Emilia… He can use some troublesome techniques.”

“Yes, it looks like it. That palm attack made my neck *really* tingle.”

“That is formidable. However…”

Joining forces, the two of them spoke while warily watching Batenkaitos, who had retreated to a distance of about thirty feet in an instant.

It had truly been in the blink of an eye.

“Leaping Dorkel’s Teleportation.”

“That’s quite the gaudy name for a simple trick for moving here and there.”

“Ah-ha-ha, are you serious? Figuring out the gist of it after a single glance? How is that fair?”

Licking the blood dripping from his gouged face, Batenkaitos let out something between a shudder and a sigh of admiration. It didn’t look like his wound was very deep, but the psychological effect of that short exchange seemed to far outweigh the physical damage.

And it was the same for Subaru, who could only watch in awe at the back-and-forth.

“Th-that was…”

“Ram is someone who can do that much if she does not have to worry about anything else. Gluttony’s queer authority is the sort that can be crushed by a sufficient difference in strength,” Beatrice explained as she held Subaru’s hand.

Her perception of Gluttony was correct. In fact, even though Batenkaitos had absorbed the skills of all sorts of masters and freely wove them into his fighting style, Reid had defeated him in a single blow.

“I didn’t think Ram had the sort of strength to match that.”

In leaving the stampede to Shaula and Meili and in trusting Julius to settle things with Reid, it was a given they would have to fight Gluttony with whoever was left. But Subaru had envisioned Emilia as their core fighter while he, Beatrice, and Ram acted as support.

He had miscalculated, but it was a happy mistake this time.

“Pu, ku-ku-ku, ah-ha-ha-ha! As expected of Sister! A wound! This severe! While replicating Carnivore Heinelga! Good. Good. Good. Good. Good. Good. Good! Eat it all! Gluttony!”

Just as Subaru was about to clench his fist, feeling like their odds of victory were high, Gluttony started cheering.

The left side of his face was covered in blood, but he didn’t show any sign of pain as he clapped his hands and looked back and forth between Ram and Subaru.

The light in his gleaming eyes was from a terrifyingly

passionate obsession.

"Sister and you are both here together! We can't get enough! The old idol and the current one…you are both our saviors! Every cell of our body, our very soul! It's quivering! It's gloating! Our stomach is rumbling!"

"…Idol? Ram aside, why are you adding me?"

"You don't get it! Because you're special, Subaru!"

Hugging his thin body as he appealed to them with a sickly sweet voice—the repulsive Archbishop said words and made gestures that evoked an impossible image.

Gluttony consumed people's memories and names, storing up a massive number of lives inside himself. His copy of those lives could be used for more than just fights. He could also re-create everyday mannerisms and speech patterns, habits and idiosyncrasies—and even feelings.

The black hand that shattered Emilia's ice greatsword, the leaping ability that created such distance in the blink of an eye, the carnivore that had reduced the damage of the wind blade—they all appeared behind his back.

But right now, the life his small body was most faithfully reflecting was—

"You're copying *her*…!"

"That's it, mister! You remember. That rich, full-bodied hatred that should be directed at us! The aroma of that obsession! The vibrant rage! The thick, pitch-black stew of emotions that we were supposed to taste! Now it's time to slurp it to the last drop!"

Batenkaitos spread his arms wide, his hazy eyes focusing on Subaru. His drunkenness made him really seem like a maiden in love. Or perhaps madly obsessed.

Subaru didn't know that passion, but the original Subaru Natsuki surely did.

"You're our savior…no, we should say it like this! You're our hero! Our dear, earnest, mean, endearing, fragile hero who we have to stand beside, who the very thought of brings heartache… Our hero who tolerates us even so…!"

"_____"

Batenkaitos's eyes were shimmering as Subaru fell completely silent.

He could see the Archbishop's appearance overlapping with that of another person. It shouldn't have been possible…the girl

who had so powerfully spurred him on when he had been on the verge of shutting himself off from everything.

The moment those images overlapped, Subaru's body was consumed by rage and dread.

“How is it?! Let’s reenact that moving moment! Let’s start here, mister! From one, no, from ze—”

A holy ground that should never be touched was being corrupted.

In that instant—

“—Eyaaa!”

“Bgh?!”

Batenkaitos was so focused on reproducing the memory, his attention had focused entirely on Subaru.

He had surely not let his guard down, against Ram at least, but Subaru and Ram could be talked with. His attention should not have been focused on them.

“—Murak, I suppose. And…”

“Sneak up and wham!”

Beatrice and Emilia nodded to each other. As a result of their teamwork, Batenkaitos had been knocked unconscious by a blow to the back of the head.

The Archbishop of Gluttony had been hit by a heavy swing of Emilia’s ice hammer after she snuck up on him.

Dumbfounded, Subaru hoarsely asked, “…W-we won?”

3

“_____”

Batenkaitos slumped, his eyes wide and empty.

And the one who had done it, Emilia—

“Hooray!”

—nodded cheerfully and raced over to Beatrice, giving her a high five.

Seeing that, Subaru looked over at Ram.

“Umm, so basically…?”

“Using Lady Beatrice’s Murak…shadow magic to erase her presence, Lady Emilia stealthily snuck behind the enemy. It is a method that fits Lady Emilia, but…”

Ram massaged her brow, as if feeling tired. Noticing that, Emilia cautiously peered at her…

“Umm, was that bad?”

“…No, it was splendid. Yes, it was truly splendid.”

Swallowing her mixed emotions, Ram praised Emilia and looked at the slumped-over Batenkaitos with withering disappointment.

I totally get you. To think Batenkaitos, who I had thought of as a mortal enemy, would be this easily beaten.

"It's all thanks to Betty and Emilia's splendid teamwork. Be grateful."

"That was more like a head-on collision. But either way, good job, both of you! Let's get him tied up quick and go take care of the next problem!" Subaru patted Beatrice's head.

"Wait. You intend to let him live?" Ram furrowed her brow. "He will be nothing but a potential threat."

Her concern was natural. Subaru also wanted to avoid leaving any loose ends. Even if it was just the shallow peace of mind gained by killing someone.

"I'm not saying tie him up because I don't want to kill. The whole reason we came to this tower is to save the people whose lives were stolen by them, wasn't it?"

"That's true. All the more reason…"

"There's no proof that what he's eaten will be returned if he's killed, right? Not only that, but we'll also lose our chance to pry that information out of him if he's dead. That's what I'm afraid of."

"_____"

He had already asked Louis Arneb about memories and names that were eaten. Her answer was that she didn't know how it worked. But that was just her answer. There was no guarantee her brothers' answers would be the same.

"If you have a way to get the answer out right now, then fine, but without that, we don't have the capacity to deal with him now. There are plenty of problems besides him."

"…The tower rumbling, and Julius and the others being missing are concerning."

Ram scrunched up her face in thought as she listened to Subaru's argument.

"Ram, I agree with Subaru. For now, I'll make ice shackles so he can't move, and we can ask him more later."

While Ram was thinking, Emilia chimed in on Subaru's side. She swung her arms, and there was a crackling sound as ice formed around Batenkaitos's hands and feet, binding him tightly.

"See? That should be enough, right, Ram?"

"…Understood. However, when it comes time for discussions, please allow me to handle it personally."

"—? Okay, got it. I'll let you talk to him."

Emilia's and Ram's understanding of the word *discussions* were not quite in sync, but Subaru couldn't find a reason to explain the difference or to stop Ram from handling the interrogation.

There was no reason for him to feel sympathy for Gluttony.

"So Subaru, we've taken care of Gluttony here, but what next? Reinforce Shaula and Meili? Or…?"

"Yeah, about that. Just give me a moment. I'm thinking."

Subaru put his mind to figuring out what their next steps should be.

Of the five obstacles, they already had party members set out to deal with the demon beast stampede and with Reid, and unexpectedly, Gluttony's intrusion had been beaten back by Emilia and Beatrice's teamwork.

The remaining obstacles were the mysterious giant scorpion and the specter of demise that crushed the entire tower, and of course the remaining Gluttony, who had not shown himself yet.

"Louis said the names 'Lye' and 'Roy,' so…if Batenkaitos is Lye, then the other should be Roy. He hasn't shown himself once yet."

There was trouble happening all around the tower. It was hard to imagine there was yet another obstacle he wasn't aware of, and he didn't want to dwell on the possibility.

If nothing else, it didn't seem like the shadow of the other Gluttony was lurking around any of his comrades who were scattered around the tower.

Meili was currently fighting the demon beasts swarming around the tower, Echidna was moving Rem and Patlash toward Taygeta, and Julius was moving violently around the second floor.

"—Julius is having a rough time. That must be Reid."

"Subaru? What are you talking about? Where are you looking?"

"Where? What are you talking about, Beatrice? I'm…"

Glancing at Beatrice, who was peering up at him, he suddenly realized the weirdness of what he was saying.

He couldn't say what exactly he was looking at and how he knew.

"What is this? I can tell where everyone is…and what they're doing? I can see…?"

Clutching his chest, Subaru confirmed the feeling—the

inexplicable sight that allowed him to sense something like faintly glowing lights.

It was the same feeling that he'd noticed in the middle of the last loop—he didn't know how to describe it, but it was a sort of sixth sense that let him feel the presence of his comrades in the tower.

"_____"

The way he had managed to find Ram and the others on the way here with unerring accuracy was a sign of his subconscious knowledge. He had just accepted it as naturally as if he'd been born with a third arm.

But Subaru didn't know anyone who naturally had a third arm since birth.

"—!"

Subaru finally realized how unnatural this all was and groaned. The repulsive, incomprehensible sensation was physically nauseating.

"Subaru!"

Beatrice steadied his shoulder as he stumbled. Noticing something was strange, Emilia raced over, too, but he held his hand up to stop them.

"It-it's okay. I'm just a little lightheaded…"

"Are you sure? You look awful. It might be because you read Reid's book of the dead. Maybe you should hide somewhere."

"Don't bench me like that, please. I'm just in the middle of upgrading."

"Upgrading…?"

Emilia cocked her head at the unfamiliar word. Even as he was thinking that her gestures were cute, Subaru desperately tried to get his newfound powers under control.

I don't know how this happened, but I can't let this sixth sense slip away.

With all of his comrades scattered right now and virtually unable to fight himself, this was an authority that Subaru wanted more than water in a desert.

"Quit acting up and become mine—"

The unnatural third arm had emerged in response to the cry of Subaru Natsuki's soul.

—So it should answer my call now.

"_____"

As he made that wish, the third arm took root inside him.

It allowed his sense to extend for an unbelievable range and perceive his comrades all around the tower as faint lights.

“I can vaguely tell where everyone is…and if they’re safe or not. With this…”

I can still be useful for breaking out of this situation— Just as he thought that…

“—Ahhh, you’re so stingy, mister.”

…there was a voice slithering along the ground that drew their attention. It was the resentful—no, the jealous—voice of Batenkaitos, whose limbs were still bound in ice.

He had apparently regained his consciousness. Before any of them could react, Batenkaitos closed one eye. Then his body disappeared.

“Wh—?”

“Subaru Natsuki.”

While they were stunned by his magic act, Batenkaitos crossed the sky with his mouth open wide. His toothy maw uttered Subaru’s name just before his red tongue danced.

He couldn’t move in time. His instincts recoiled in the face of a predator telling him he was about to be eaten.

Batenkaitos’s mouth closed on Subaru’s neck.

“Thanks for the mea—”

—A flash of light passed over the top of Subaru’s shoulder and tore into Gluttony’s wide-open mouth.

“_____”

It happened in an instant. Neither Subaru nor anyone else had been able to move.

Batenkaitos alone let out a stunned sound as the light pierced his body and blew him away before he managed to reach Subaru’s neck.

Rather than the bloody left side that had been carved up by Ram, it was the right side of his face that sustained a grievous injury. Even that was putting it mildly. There wasn’t much left. The area from his right cheek to his right eye was completely gone, leaving a wound that didn’t bleed, because the flesh had been seared. This was the work of the same white light that was still being unleashed at Batenkaitos as he flew through the air.

The beams pierced Gluttony’s body one after another, completely obliterating him.

Bound hand and foot and hurtling through the air, Batenkaitos couldn't evade. His last hope was that instant teleportation, but it didn't seem to be activating, possibly because the source of that ability had already been destroyed. His arms, legs, torso, and head were all swallowed up in dazzling white light.

"Huh? Isn't death supposed to be more…?"

In his last moments, he started to say something, but he never got to finish.

It sounded like he was about to comment on his impending death, but no one would ever hear the rest.

Most of his body was erased, and what bloody chunks of flesh remained had been scattered across the corridor.

Confirming Gluttony's demise, Subaru exhaled, remembering to breathe again. Then his heart leaped in his chest. It started pounding furiously, like it wanted to make him understand how close he had come to dying and being robbed of something important.

"Th-that was dangerous. I almost got eaten… Thanks."

Even as his knees almost gave out, Subaru's face went slack in relief.

This was the result of his underestimating Gluttony's eccentric fixation. Fortunately, the one who paid the price had ended up being Batenkaitos.

"I wanted to keep him alive, but I won't ask for too much," Subaru said as he wiped his forehead. "You saved me there, Shaula."

"…Shaula?"

Beatrice's voice was incredibly grave. Finding that reaction strange, Subaru glanced over at her.

"Beatrice? What is it? Why the face? I know it was a close call, but…"

"No. Not that, Subaru. How can you say that's Shaula?"

"How…?"

He was confused, not understanding her question.

What do you mean 'how'? I know because I know.

The third arm that had stuck onto him, the sixth sense that let him know the current location of his comrades, was telling him that she was standing at the other end of the hall.

When it came to why she was there, he didn't know. She was supposed to be on the balcony with Meili, dealing with the monster

hordes.

Why was she in a perfect position to protect me from Gluttony?

"Subaru, get back."

"Emilia-chan? What are you…? Why do you look like…?"

Emilia held out her hand, taking up position in front of him. Ram was standing silently beside her, wand in hand and eyes fixed on something down the passage where the white light had come from.

Their caution was strange. It didn't make sense. He could feel it down the passage. A faint light. His sixth sense was letting him know an ally was over there. That's what the light was.

"—Shaula?"

"_____"

When Subaru looked, he could see the giant scorpion with its multiple red eyes overlapping with a faint light.

4

When he first heard Shaula's name, something had come to mind. It wasn't a name he was particularly attached to, but it *was* a word he had heard before.

Shaula was the name of a star that shone in the night sky he knew—a star that was part of the constellation Scorpio. And Scorpio was associated with a big, black scorpion.

It was an incredibly simple answer. It was so simple, it made him wonder about the naming sense of whoever chose that name. Of course, the main suspect was the same Subaru Natsuki who she called her master.

"Is that…Shaula?"

That short diversion in his mind wasn't enough to distract him from reality. The massive pincers evolved for slaughter rubbed together ominously. Those red eyes watched their every move. The huge black body. This was the giant scorpion, one of the five obstacles assaulting the tower.

At the very least, he had initially counted it as a threat, since the giant scorpion had gotten in their way and tormented them in the other loops. It had even killed some of them.

He would never forget the powerlessness he had felt when Beatrice and Echidna were killed. For the enemy who had done that unforgivable act to be Shaula, of all people…

“Subaru, calm down. Deep breaths.”

“_____”

Beatrice’s soft hand held his, calling a time-out as his thoughts started to fall into chaos. He noticed she was rubbing his back, trying to help him calm down.

Feeling her touch, he came to his senses. One breath in, one breath out.

“I’m okay…I think. I’m still confused, though.”

“That’s fine. And are you sure that’s Shaula?”

“Yeah, there’s no mistaking it. I can sense Shaula… Well, assuming she didn’t get swallowed up whole by it somehow.”

“The fact that she might still be perfectly calm even if that really happened is what’s scary about her.”

Beatrice’s expression softened as she went along with Subaru’s desperate joke. The joke wasn’t enough to raise his spirits, but it was a step necessary in confronting the heavy reality in front of him.

Without that, he wouldn’t be able to bear it. The fact that Shaula, who had been so genuine and unruly, who had never shown any sign of restraint or concern around Subaru—it was unthinkable that she had been duping them all along.

The thought that her smile, her words, and her attitude were all fake and that she had been a traitor deceiving them all along was just too…

“Let’s ask.”

“Lady Emilia?”

Unable to watch Subaru struggle anymore with the roiling emotions of suspicion and faith, Emilia stepped forward. Not listening to Ram, she took a deep breath.

“Hey, you! Are you Shaula? Or not?”

“_____”

“…Ah, right. You might not be able to talk. Then raise your right hand if you are Shaula, and raise your left hand if you aren’t! That way, we can tell.”

Out of consideration for the silent scorpion, Emilia tried to talk first.

She could unleash a completely merciless attack on Batenkaitos, but she was fundamentally a pacifist, so perhaps it was more accurate to say her personality was full of mystery.

The response to her request was—

“—Lady Beatrice!”

“I know!”

Immediately sensing danger, Ram looked over her shoulder, but Beatrice was already reacting. Light streamed from her raised arms, and a crystal clad in a purple light appeared in the air. The next instant, the crystal was shattered by a white light that hit it directly, creating a furious dance of light in the passage.

“Whoooooaaa?!”

“Get your head down! It’ll be bad if it hits!”

The shimmering white and purple lights flew wildly as the peal of shattering glass echoed in the air.

Behind that magnificent, eye-searing spectacle, Subaru could see that the beam of light that had laid Gluttony low had come from the scorpion’s sharp tail.

Beatrice used her magic to protect Subaru, deflecting, redirecting, and batting aside dozens of shots aimed right at them. Moreover, an overwhelming amount seemed to be targeting Subaru specifically.

“Does she have a grudge against me or something?!”

“Maybe it’s because you were always so cold to her! Try apologizing!”

“I’m sorry! My bad! It’s my fault! Please forgive me! How’s about now?!”

The shock waves rolled over their bodies as Beatrice and Subaru clung together. He tried following her valuable advice and apologized, but the white flashes didn’t abate.

But if the focus of the attack was still trained right on them…

“Just aiming at Subaru is mean. Don’t bully the weak!”

Emilia shouted and ran down the passage, slashing at the scorpion with a longsword of ice. Parrying the attack with its giant pincer, the scorpion skittered its legs as it retreated at high speed. However, Emilia gave chase with a beautiful ice attack, determined not to let it escape.

“Teya! Ey! Uryaa!”

A longsword, twin blades, a spear, and a war hammer that Emilia summoned shattered one after the other with a high-pitched sound. Silver hair fluttered amid the countless resulting ice fragments.

In response to that waltz of ice, the scorpion’s strategy was simple. Flailing wildly with its pincers and tail, it shattered Emilia’s

weapons and tried to tear her apart.

A person and a monster. A fairy and a beast. A martial arts contest was unfolding between the two, creating a deadlock that went back and forth.

"If it's a deadlock, then the balance is…"

…*Easy to break.*

Just as he was about to say that, he noticed something. The asset who ordinarily would have joined the fray by now was missing. The reason was plain to see. Ram was leaning against the wall for support. There was sweat beading on her forehead, and she was struggling to breathe as her wand hand trembled.

"Ram?! What is it?! Were you hit somewhere?! Are you hurt?!"

"…Don't shout so loudly. It makes my ears ring. And I wasn't hit."

"Then why do you look so pained…?"

Rejecting Subaru's outstretched arm, Ram shook her head. Looking her over, Subaru couldn't find any sign of injury.

"I knew our healing was just a stopgap, but…I didn't think it would only last this long."

"—! Beatrice, do you know something?"

"…Put simply, Ram has a limit to how long she can fight."

Subaru gulped at Beatrice's short explanation. After witnessing Ram's genius fighting ability in the battle against Batenkaitos, he had gotten his hopes up that they could count on her as a fighter equal to Emilia or Julius…

"Guess it was too good to be true… You should've said something sooner."

"Me? Whine to you? …Impossible."

"Good job keeping your tongue sharp even now. Up we go!"

Subaru fired back while he lifted her slender body in a princess carry.

"Let me go," she spat with a scowl. "Disgusting."

"Is this really the time?! People who've run out of battery should just be quiet while they get carried! —Beatrice!"

"I know!"

Shutting Ram up as she weakly resisted, Subaru shouted at Beatrice. Realizing what he wanted, she pointed her palms forward and unleashed her magic power.

The gleaming purple crystals that had caught the impending white flashes of death expanded again. The target for this mass of

razor-sharp crystals was the scorpion clashing with Emilia.

It would have been best to use it to finish the scorpion, but…

“Subaru, your refusal to give up really is one of your selling points, I suppose.”

“…Sorry for the trouble.”

“None of that now!”

Because of the scorpion’s unexpected identity, Subaru was hesitant to finish it off.

Guessing as much even though he didn’t say anything, Beatrice generously forgave his weakness and prepared to support Emilia with a bombardment of crystals.

“Emilia! Can you match Betty?”

“Okay! I’ll give it my best guess!”

Despite its vagueness, that was a surprisingly reassuring answer. Emilia combined her ice arts with Beatrice’s purple missiles. The sound of the air freezing overlapped with the sound of frozen time being shattered.

The passage peppered with purple bolts hardened with an almost indescribable sound, drastically limiting where the scorpion could go with its massive body. Leaping forward on pure instinct, Emilia formed her thinnest blade, made of delicate ice, and slashed.

“_____”

With a sharp enough blade, a slash resembled the breeze.

Whether that was actually something an ancient swordmaster once said or not, that’s exactly what Subaru thought Emilia’s sword sounded like.

The joint connecting the scorpion’s pincer to the rest of its limb was severed, and a green liquid splattered as the pincer fell. It landed with a heavy thud. This was the fruit of their struggle.

An obvious sign of…

“If you don’t want to suffer anymore, then just—”

“—Emilia! It’s autotomy!”

“Huh?!”

Subaru shouted desperately as Emilia tried to convince the scorpion to surrender.

Destroying one of the scorpion’s primary weapons had been the trigger for a terrible tragedy in the loop before last.

“_____”

Entirely unrelatedly, the scorpion’s legs pumped as it skittered away. This was the same sort of retreat it had performed during the

loop before last, too—in which case, Subaru knew what came next.

Hearing the word *autotomy*, Ram and Beatrice immediately realized the danger. Ram summoned a wind with the very last dregs of her strength, while Beatrice deployed a purple barrier.

"Emilia-cha—"

There wasn't even enough time to finish his shouted warning.

The next instant, the souvenir the scorpion left behind glowed just before it exploded.

"_____"

The blinding light, the deafening blast, and a shock wave that shook heaven and earth. He desperately hugged the body in his arms close, enduring the pain he felt all over.

Lifted off the ground and sent tumbling by the blast, he slowly sat up as a dense smoke filled the air.

"Geh, ngah… I-is everyone…guh?"

"Where are you touching?"

Subaru fumbled around with tears in his eyes, when a palm thrust sent his jaw back lightly. As he bit his tongue accidentally, his eyes got even more watery.

"It seems we both managed to survive."

"Y-yeah. Looks like it. Sorry, did I touch you someplace weird?"

"Yes. You touched my shoulder."

"That's gotta be the most innocent spot!"

Rubbing his jaw that had been hit for basically no reason, Subaru stood. He started to give her a hand, but since her condition wasn't great, he lifted her up instead.

"Tch."

"Save it! The others…Emilia-chan! Beatrice!"

Grimacing at Ram's unendearing response, Subaru looked around for the others.

The destructive power of the scorpion's lingering proximity mine was colossal, causing tremendous damage to the fourth floor. There was a big hole in the floor and ceiling of the passage they were in, and the walls looked like they might collapse at any moment.

"Emilia-chan! Beatrice! I'm begging you, say something!"

"*Cough.* We're okay, Subaru. Me and Beatrice both."

There was a response from the other side of the dense smoke, across the hole in the floor. The next moment, a figure appeared through the dust—Emilia, her clothes and hair the worse for wear.

She was holding Beatrice in her arms, making for a curious mirror image of Subaru and Ram.

"Thank goodness…the both of you…nothing happened?"

"Mm, we're fine, thanks to Ram's wind redirecting the blast. That's how I managed to make it in time with my ice wall."

"Even so, it was still just barely enough. We survived by the skin of our teeth."

Holding Beatrice, Emilia hopped across the gap. Seeing that neither of them seemed to have any notable injuries, Subaru breathed a sigh of relief.

Then he bit his lip in frustration as he realized the one who had caused this mess had quickly snuck away.

"This much from one pincer…that's not a souvenir you can just laugh off. There's no telling what other tricks it has up its sleeve."

"I suppose that sort of obstinacy comes from her master."

"_____"

Ram's retort silenced Subaru.

Driving the scorpion back and getting more time to think did nothing to quell his doubts. And the biggest issue at hand was…

"…Umm, was that really Shaula?" Emilia asked.

That was the question on everyone's mind. Or perhaps not everyone's mind. Subaru had a different thought. Even if he wanted to deny it, it wasn't in doubt for him.

"I'm sure. And she was definitely aiming at me."

"It's true that Shaula was clingy with you…but she should know that you would die if she did something like that."

"You should have noticed yourself, Lady Emilia. That light attack is the same one that targeted us out in the Auguria Dunes."

"That's…true…but…"

Emilia lowered her eyes at Ram's harsh statement. She didn't want to admit it, but in her heart, she had noticed the cruel truth, too.

That giant scorpion was Shaula, and she had become their enemy.

But there was something that still didn't make sense.

"_____"

Searching for an answer to resolve that unease, Subaru expanded the range of his sixth sense.

He could sense Ram in his arms, Emilia and Beatrice right in front of him. Echidna and Rem in a place that was presumably

Taygeta. Patlash was near them, and farther away, downstairs, was Joseph. Turning his focus to the fourth floor balcony, he detected Meili's presence.

"Meili is still fighting on the balcony…"

"…In which case, she wasn't attacked by Shaula."

"That's what it looks like… What the heck was Shaula thinking?"

It was contradictory. Too many of her actions didn't make sense.

He had even seen with his own two eyes how Shaula had been holding back the tide of demon beasts surrounding the tower. He didn't know what change of heart she might have had, but she hadn't hurt Meili.

"Umm, you two have been talking like it's just normal, but…"

"It was bothering me too. What are you seeing, Barusu?"

Subaru and Beatrice had been talking as if his sixth sense was open knowledge, but Emilia and Ram made them slow down.

It was a natural reaction. If anything, Beatrice was the odd one for going along with it.

"If you were not just talking drivel when you said you felt Shaula, then you must have some sort of reason. Is it some odd new magic with Lady Beatrice…? You aren't going to say it is a blessing, are you?"

"That is a rude way to describe our magic. And it's not a blessing," Beatrice answered grimly. "…It is an authority, I suppose."

"Authority…?"

Emilia and Ram cocked their heads. They looked like they had not heard the word before, but the sound of it felt right to Subaru, for some reason. Almost as if that was the natural way to describe it.

"Beatrice, what is an 'authority'?"

"…Think of it as something akin to a more effective blessing."

"A what?"

Ram had a pensive look on her face as she glanced up at Subaru's. But Subaru couldn't tell what thought might be lurking behind her pink eyes. All he could say was that Beatrice's explanation was probably not wrong.

"I don't know the details, but Beatrice is right. The effect of this authority or whatever lets me generally tell where everyone is

inside the tower. And…”

“Amazing… Ah, is that power why you thought that big scorpion was Shaula?”

“Pretty much.”

There was a mixture of concern and astonishment in Emilia’s eyes as Subaru nodded emphatically.

Authority, sixth sense…whatever it was called, Subaru could use it to sense that the light that was presumably Shaula had taken up a position quite a distance from them. Whether that was to heal the damage of losing its claw or for some other reason, he couldn’t say.

There was one thing he knew for certain…

“—It was probably after me.”

“_____”

He felt oddly confident of that.

It had taken time to accept that the giant scorpion was actually Shaula, but it wasn’t hard to swallow that its target was Subaru. As long as it wasn’t after any of his other comrades, then there was plenty to take advantage of.

“Right, and speaking of authority…”

He didn’t know the origin of the authority he possessed, but that wasn’t important now. What mattered more wasn’t Subaru’s authority—it was Gluttony’s.

There was no trace left of the remnants of Batenkaitos’s corpse in the hallway after the explosion. There was no need to confirm it, though. Gluttony had died before their eyes.

In which case, what about the scars gouged into the world by his authority?

“Ram, are your memories—?”

“If you mean Rem, I still can’t remember her.”

“_____”

Ram shook her head, rejecting Subaru’s faint hope. Looking over at Emilia and Beatrice, she surmised there wasn’t any change in their memories, either. There was still the possibility that the missing bits might gradually return with time, but…

“Doesn’t seem like defeating Gluttony is enough to recover what we lost…”

“A troublesome enemy… Vexingly so.” Ram grimaced bitterly.

This was what Subaru had been afraid of, but there was no changing the fact that Batenkaitos was dead. It was a simple fact

that one of their options for recovering what Gluttony had stolen had disappeared.

"No, don't get depressed."

"…Emilia-chan?"

Emilia took a step forward and shattered the darkening mood. There was an earnest light in her purple eyes as she looked between Subaru and Ram.

"We have to keep it together, all the more so in a situation with such a hodgepodge of terrible things. Echidna and Julius and the others are doing their best right now."

"_____"

"And we have to have a proper talk with Shaula, too, right?"

Emilia was single-mindedly positive, incapable of standing still, managing to pull Subaru up whenever he was on the verge of stumbling.

And not just this time. Last time. And the time before. And not just Subaru. It had probably been the same for the other Subaru Natsuki as well.

"Mm, all right! Let's get fired up! Beatrice, cheek me!"

"Ch-cheek you? What would you have Betty do?"

"Give me a slap!"

"Horyaa!"

While Subaru was feeling moved, Emilia had an unreasonable ask for Beatrice. Beatrice went along with the request and gave Emilia a solid slap with both hands.

There was a crack, and Emilia groaned a little bit.

"All right, thank you, Beatrice. Do you want me to do it for you?"

"If you did that, Betty's neck would be torn off, so thank you, but no thank you."

"Ha-ha, silly Beatrice."

Emilia laughed like it was just teasing, but Beatrice's eyes were serious.

Either way, though, watching the two of them, Subaru realized that some of the tenseness in his shoulders had slipped away.

It wasn't as if it was okay to relax completely, but getting too tense was also a problem.

"Lady Emilia is relaxed… Not that she ever isn't, though."

"I don't think you're one to talk, tho—owww!"

"Stop saying such rude things. So what now?"

Pinching Subaru's neck from ultra-close range, Ram already seemed like she was back to her usual self. Subaru's eyes watered a bit as he nodded and focused his attention on his perception again.

He also wanted to talk things through with Shaula. Unfortunately, that wasn't their top priority.

Should we rendezvous with Echidna and the non-combatants, or check on Meili to see what happened when Shaula left?

"—Huh?"

Subaru was dumbstruck as he expanded the range of his sixth sense to search for contacts around the tower.

The ones who had not moved from their holding positions were fine. He could understand that the Shaula giant scorpion was probably healing its wounds, too.

But a different entity was moving through the tower at an absurd speed.

"—Above."

"Get back, Barusu!"

The goose bumps he felt turned to confidence when he heard Ram's warning.

Obeying, he leaped backward while still carrying her, at the exact moment the ceiling he was looking up at—the cracked ceiling almost destroyed by the explosion—split diagonally.

An instant later, a shock wave turned the stone that made up the tower into dust. The dust and rubble that had finally settled burst into the air again, blocking their vision once more.

There was no trace of the supposedly solidly built tower that was supposed to be indestructible. The scorpion's explosive autotomy, the pitch-black shadow's pressure, and this current destruction…

"Subaru…! And Lady Emilia and the others, too."

"Julius?!"

Breaking through the dust cloud flying toward them was Julius, his white uniform stained red with blood. Immediately kneeling and wiping the red stain at the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand, he looked at Subaru, who was also covered by rubble and dust.

"I believe it was just a few minutes since we parted ways, but I can see you have also had some excitement."

"Not as much as you, cutting straight through the tower," Subaru fired back.

Julius had appeared after crashing through the tower floors at a savage speed. It was movement in three dimensions that ignored all physical obstacles like walls and floors—something entirely at odds with the image of Julius that Subaru had in his head.

"There's no mistaking it, but…I'm begging you, tell me you've claimed Reid's head, please."

"As a knight, I am afraid I must confess that giving a report at odds with reality is excruciatingly difficult."

"…That is already answer enough, I suppose."

Julius's expression was quiet as he rejected Subaru's heartfelt plea. And as if to confirm Beatrice's bitter response, there was a sound of footsteps from the rubble.

The distinct sound of sandals.

"Hah! Rollin' out all the babes for me? So you do know how to do this after all. I was just starting to get bored playin' around. So now it's your turn to entertain me? Huh?"

"…This is a terrible development."

Ram's blunt response was what everyone there was feeling.

The tall, red-haired man slowly emerged from the smoke, a ferocious, demonic aura emanating from his entire body, the incomprehensible judgment of God—

"—Reid Astrea."

"Ka-ka-ka, don't look so annoyed, small fry. I just came here since it seemed like the tower was getting busted up. I'm disappointed to see you here, too."

"In that case, why not pull a U-turn and go back to the waiting room? An overwhelmingly powerful guy like you'll get a bad rep stooping to something as lame as picking on the weak."

"Sorry, but when you're born like this, you can't do anything but pick on the weak. No matter where I look in this world, there ain't anything but people weaker than me."

It was an arrogant and insolent declaration, but Reid had the air of strength that made it impossible to deny. Feeling it directly through this skin, Subaru gulped.

One after the other, problems were ostentatiously standing athwart their path. And the way they were steadily getting more dangerous was nasty.

"Reid…why are you here? I thought you couldn't leave that room?"

"Oy, oy, don't make me laugh, babe. I go wherever I want, cut

whatever I want, and take whoever I want. You think I give a shit about anyone else's standards?"

"That's *really* selfish."

But as Subaru gritted his teeth at the tense situation, Emilia stood up to Reid.

Gentle and pacific, and a maybe a little too calm. That was Emilia's nature in a nutshell. But even she couldn't help being put off by Reid's outrageously arrogant philosophy.

And Reid didn't seem to mind talking to Emilia, thanks to her pretty face, judging by how he answered her in a noticeably better mood than when he was talking to Subaru. Meanwhile…

"The situation looks awful, Julius, but I have good news and bad news and some more bad news."

"That is one piece of bad news extra… Then let me hear the good news."

"One of the Gluttonies who snuck into the tower, Batenkaitos, is dead. The corpse is all over the place."

"That is…"

Julius caught his breath, but his yellow eyes widened at that news. And then he immediately touched his own chest and closed his eyes.

"…Then one of the pieces of bad news is that the stolen memories have not returned?"

"That's right. The memories don't come back, even with Gluttony dead. That goes for me, Rem, and you too. The second piece of bad news is that Shaula is an enemy now. Or at least tentatively."

"She has changed appearance, so it is easy to distinguish," Ram added. "If you see a very large scorpion, that's an enemy."

"I rather wish my ears were deceiving me."

Julius's refined visage tensed at the barrage of information. Standing beside him, Subaru kept his voice low in order not to draw the attention of the wild red beast.

"Anyway, given that, we're going to have to be careful with our anti-Gluttony operations. Step one is gonna be searching for the other one that should be around here, but—"

"Regarding that, I have both good news and bad news of my own."

"You two are the same…"

Subaru didn't want to let Ram's comment slide, but he didn't

have much choice and focused on Julius's almost vengeful retort.

"Then I'll also have the good news first."

"I know the location of the other Gluttony you are searching for."

"—! Seriously? Then where is he? We have to take care of him before he gets to the others."

"The answer to that question is the bad news, I'm afraid."

Subaru leaned forward, latching on to Julius when he mentioned the as yet undiscovered Gluttony, but Julius shook his head grimly and slowly raised the sword in his hand…

"The Archbishop of Gluttony, Roy Alphard, is right there."

"…Huh?"

Julius pointed the tip of his knight's sword straight forward.

"_____"

The sword was pointing at the massive man with a ferocious, sharklike smile. There was no chance of misunderstanding; he was pointing at that red-haired instrument of violence.

And as Subaru and Ram both fell silent, Julius continued.

"The first-generation Sword Saint Reid Astrea before us. He is the Archbishop of Gluttony Roy Alphard himself."

5

It took Subaru a few seconds to absorb that statement and to digest the meaning.

"Reid is…Roy Alphard…?"

Hearing something entirely unexpected, Subaru's mind stopped one step away from understanding. Like reading a book in a foreign language and not being able to decipher it, no matter how he tried.

It would have made more sense as a riddle.

"_____"

But seeing Julius's face as he held his sword out while looking at Reid, it didn't feel like that was the case.

He wasn't the type to invite more chaos in an already dangerous situation by making a mindless joke. Subaru was sure about this evaluation after getting to know the man again after losing his memories.

If his claim was neither a lie nor a joke, then the situation was grave.

"So the most straightforward assumption is that Alphard guy

transformed into Reid and—”

“Hold on, wait up.” Reid wrinkled his nose. “That misunderstanding ain’t funny.”

“Eh?”

“This ain’t some stupid joke, bastard. Don’t go thinkin’ stupid shit like I’m some other dumbass in disguise.”

Subaru couldn’t tell if that annoyance was genuinely Reid’s or a performance by the transformed Gluttony, but it at least didn’t look like he was trying to hide his identity. Simply put, this was just a childish temper tantrum.

“I’m me. Nothing’ll change that. That’s why I’m here. Hear me? Who’s gonna disagree? Huh?”

“_____”

Touching the patch over his left eye, Reid declared his identity like he was baring his fangs.

While Subaru’s confusion deepened after hearing that, Ram shifted in his arms. There was a faint surprise in her pink eyes.

“Could it be…?” she murmured softly. “Lady Beatrice, you mentioned it before. That the Archbishop of Gluttony we fought in the Water Gate City could freely change his form.”

“…Betty was thinking the same thing as you.”

Beatrice’s adorable cheeks tensed as she nodded at Ram’s question. The two of them seemed to have reached an agreement on something, but neither Subaru nor Emilia could follow their logic. Irritated at their reaction, Ram sighed a little.

“The Gluttony we sighted previously in a different location could change his form freely…no, I suppose it was probably limited to the form of someone whose memories he had eaten.”

“An absurd ability to reproduce not just the victim’s personality but even their physical form. It wouldn’t be strange if in the course of doing something like that, the Archbishop’s soul became disassociated, and they could no longer return to normal.”

“So it’s not just techniques? They can even copy bodies? That would definitely be ideal for someone with a copying ability…”

Defeating someone with the ability to imitate other people’s abilities because they couldn’t fully control those powers was a fairly common trope.

So Ram and Beatrice’s theory—replicating the original owner’s physical body to better accommodate the stolen abilities—made a lot of sense.

“And that Gluttony is making use of that…or perhaps *made* use of that is more accurate.”

“Past tense? You don’t mean…?”

Subaru’s eyes widened as he grasped Ram’s implication. Looking at Julius for an answer, he slowly, elegantly nodded.

Julius’s yellow eyes focused again on Reid.

“Ms. Ram’s and Lady Beatrice’s conclusion is correct. The man standing before us…his flesh is indeed Roy Alphard’s. But his mind is not.”

“—His mind?”

“Roy Alphard consumed Reid Astrea’s memories and then had control of his own soul wrested from him by those very memories. And that is how he descended from the second floor and is standing here without any restrictions.”

“_____”

Subaru stood there speechlessly as Julius confirmed the most preposterous possibility.

Can something like that really happen?

But it explained everything about the mystery surrounding Reid, including how he had suddenly gained his freedom and could walk around the tower in all this chaos even though he was supposed to be confined to the second floor as an examiner. It made perfect sense if he had taken over Gluttony’s body.

“So he fell into the most terrifying trap of replicating memories.”

“In other words, the strongest ego won out… What a risky gamble.”

Ram subtly mocked Alphard’s rashness to challenge someone with an ego as powerful as Reid’s.

Can’t say I disagree. However, while it wasn’t obvious who was the more difficult challenge to defeat, Reid or Alphard, as far as which was more inconvenient, the answer was clearly Reid.

With his strength and the lingering question of whether he even knew what they wanted to learn, he truly was one of the five obstacles in their way, and nothing less than a calamity.

Why did Alphard want to do something so reckless…?

“Roy Alphard said it was his nature. As Gluttony.”

“…You talked to him?”

“As I reached the second floor, I arrived just as Roy Alphard and Reid were facing off with each other.”

Julius explained all that he had seen. Reid and Alphard facing each other in that white space on the second floor. How the anomaly that was Reid Astrea was consumed, and how Alphard's soul was also consumed in the process.

"…I'm amazed you just let yourself get eaten."

"You should be amazed he actually had the balls to try and eat me. In the end, no one can go against their nature. The rug rat sacrificed himself on that altar."

"But you didn't resist being eaten by Alphard, either. Is that because you were sure you would be able to take over his consciousness?"

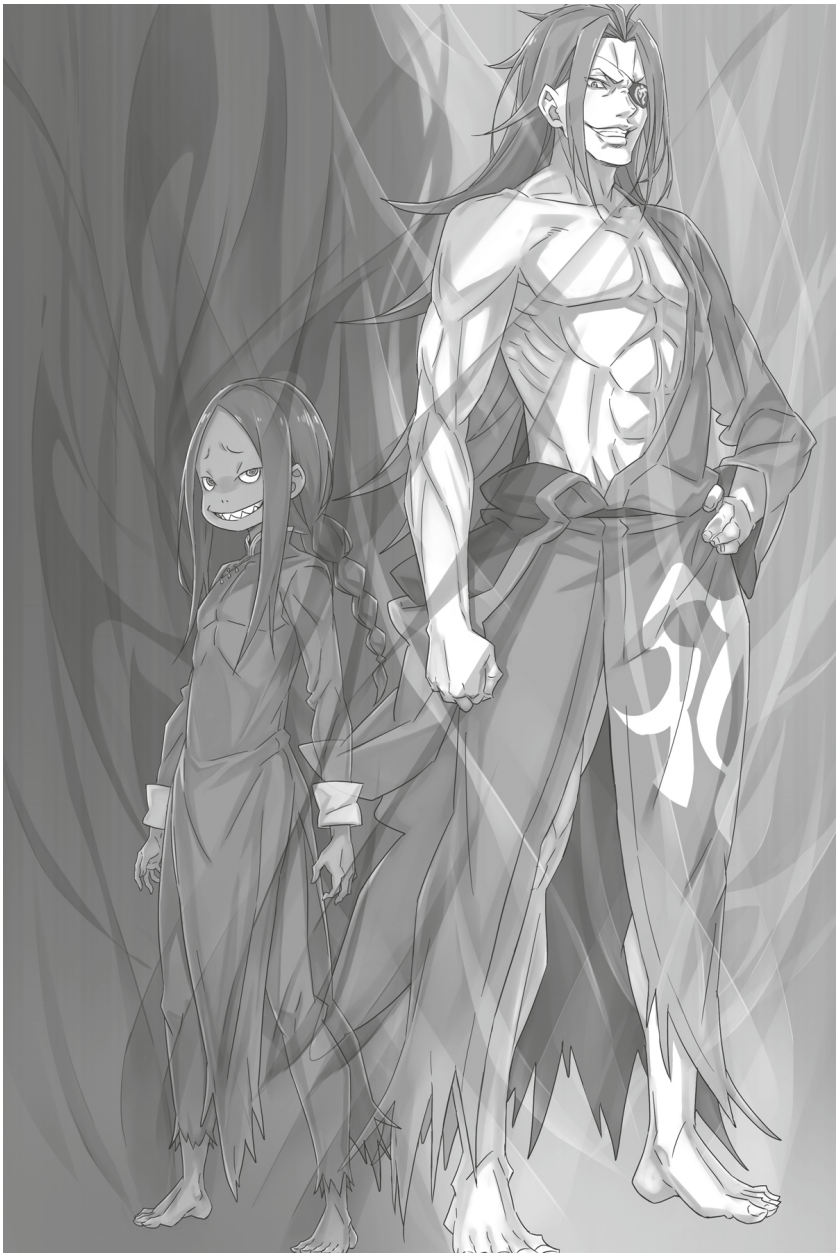
"It wasn't anything smart like that. There's just one thing I'm sure of."

Scowling at Julius's question, Reid scratched his ear with a finger. And then he flashed a ferocious grin.

"—That I'm me."

Most likely, that was the key to Reid Astrea's soul, and also the answer that Roy Alphard had misunderstood. Gluttony had not been eaten by a person; he had been consumed by a monster.

And that indicated one undeniable reality.



“Umm, may I ask something?” Having finally gotten a grasp on the situation, Emilia, who had been silent this whole time, raised her hand. Turning her purple eyes to Reid, she asked, “…Does that mean you are alive again?”

“Yeah. Now I can shack up some place better with you, hotness. You’re serving the booze tonight. And not just booze. There’s a lot more on the menu, too.”

“—? Are you inviting me out? I’ve only ever gone on a date with Puck and Subaru, so sorry. Also…”

She had just breezily mentioned some critical information Subaru couldn’t ignore, but this wasn’t really the moment to delve into the details. Moreover, he was a little surprised that Emilia could keep up with Reid’s wild banter.

Despite Subaru’s surprise, though, the corners of Emilia’s eyes raised a little.

“Congratulations on being able to walk around freely now. That’s *really* great…but we have some business with the boy who tried to eat you and ended up getting eaten by you. So…”

“Give this body back to him? Yeah, I know your situation, babe. There’s somethin’ you wanna get back, right? Keh, that dirty rug rat knows a lot of weird shit.”

“—! You can see Alphard’s memories?! In that case—”

“Lend you a hand? Oy, oy, don’t make me laugh,” Reid spat.

He aggravatedly grabbed the cloth around his waist. Apparently, it wasn’t just being brought back to life; Reid had even stolen Roy Alphard’s memory, the ability to glimpse one part of Gluttony’s authority.

However, it was something that apparently clashed with his aesthetics…

“I ain’t givin’ him over to you, and it ain’t my job to help you, either. And other than hotness there, none of you have passed my examination, either.”

“You’re still insisting on that exam even now?”

“You got it wrong. I’m not being insistent. It’s about the principle.”

Reid bared his teeth, revealing a mindset impossibly at odds with theirs.

I already knew it. Every other loop, no matter how big a disaster hit,

he never changed his actions.

Even with his freedom, he still lived up to his role as examiner —*no, what he lives up to isn't some role. He's just being true to himself.*

But either way…

"I see. If you won't agree, then I guess there's no helping it."

Emilia heaved a sigh, like she was saying "Well, that's a shame." His response was enough for her to decide it was all right to attack him.

"Sorry."

That wasn't directed at Reid, but at Beatrice, who she was holding.

Beatrice's mouth opened in surprise as she was flung from Emilia's spinning arms, tracing an arc through the air, and landing gently in a chair made of ice that had formed in the passage.

—Dashing like an arrow through the hall, Emilia swung her ice sword at Reid's neck.

"Hah!"

Emilia didn't hesitate once she decided to act, and Reid caught her surprise attack with a laugh. And the tool he used to do it was the pair of chopsticks he had pulled from his clothes.

Those again…

This wasn't Subaru's first time seeing him use chopsticks as a weapon, but that didn't make the sight any less strange. Especially after he sent Emilia flying through the crumbling passage with them.

"Hah! As expected, you catch on quick, hotness! But, you understand, right? Your examination is already over."

"In that case, let everyone else pass, too!"

"Oy, oy, where's the logic in that? There's no reason for me to do that."

"Please!"

"Your begging's got no charm. At least strip first."

It was a plea that was quintessentially Emilia, spoken even as she was in the middle of launching another icy attack, but Reid had no interest in listening.

At a glance, it might have seemed like Emilia was overwhelming him with her superior number of attacks. The truth couldn't be more different.

Emilia's strength was the real deal, and it made her more than a match for Gluttony and the scorpion. At this range, it wasn't an

exaggeration to say she could defeat one hundred Subarus with ease. But even so, she was still just child's play to Reid.

With just a mere handful of exchanges, he used those chopsticks to defeat everything Emilia brought to bear. It was an unbridgeable gap in strength between them that even an amateur could see.

"Lady Emilia…! Ngh, Barusu!"

"I know! Julius! Beatrice! Let's do this!"

Ram could see the future of Emilia's defeat, too. Firing back at her raised voice, Subaru decided to challenge Reid with all of their combined strength.

It was an unexpected matchup—ordinarily, the battlefield should not have ended up like this, but it was an actively developing situation.

We have to play it by ear and do our best—

"—That ain't your style of fighting."

"_____"

As if he'd read Subaru's mind, Reid cut Subaru down with those words even faster than with the chopsticks.

And Reid Astrea didn't need much time to cut through Subaru Natsuki's shoddy adaptation, either.

Just one minute later, there was no one left standing in the passage, save Reid.

"Uh, ugh…"

Emilia groaned, somehow managing to attempt standing. Her legs were painfully discolored, and they refused to cooperate as she tried to channel her noble spirit into the strength to rise.

"_____"

Facedown a little distance from her, Beatrice was unmoving and unconscious. The excellent mage who appeared to be nothing more than a little girl didn't have any means of resisting the style of the legendary swordsman revived after four hundred years.

"Humiliating…"

Ram, sitting with her back against the wall as blood dripped from her mouth, had put up the best fight. Even in her battered state, she had wrung herself dry and almost managed to scratch Reid. She was the hero most worthy of the medal of honor.

And—

"You had no chance, even if you used every trick in the book, but it would've been better if you at least tried. You'd still be a

small fry either way, though. I guess you know that now."

"Sunova…bitch…"

Reid's sandaled foot kicked Subaru and pressed his head against the ground.

It was gut-wrenching, but the pain searing his whole body and Reid's condescending comment really said it all. Even with a desperate charge, he still couldn't manage more than emulating a cornered rat lashing out at a cat.

But the gap between them was so large that if Subaru was a rat, Reid was a dragon.

There was no hope of winning.

No, that's not it. I couldn't create a chance of winning.

"It's not about numbers. You guys just don't understand that. You get it now, right?"

"_____"

Standing above Subaru on the ground, Reid turned one eye toward the last remaining opponent—Julius Juukulius. He was the only one who had just barely managed to stay upright, albeit on his knees instead of on his feet.

The will to fight still had not gone out in his yellow gaze.

"Why…?"

"Huh?"

Reid raised his eyebrow at the question. Watching him, Julius rubbed the corner of his mouth, and with knees trembling, he stood. And looking Reid straight in the eye, he continued.

"Why are you obsessed with me?"

"Ah? Me, obsessed with you? Bite your tongue. A guy who's all talk and looks is the thing I hate most. Why would I be obsessed with somethin' like that?"

"Then why—?"

"—You're the one who has a reason to be obsessed with me, though. Or are you really fine with me leavin'?"

"_____"

It was hard to say Reid's answer was clear. He was the type of person who didn't feel it worth the effort to put everything into words. And because of that, a lot of his answers were emotive and hard to understand.

"You too, small fry. You don't get it, either, just like him. You don't know how to swing your sword. There's no fun like that."

"I don…use a sword…gaaah"

“Adaptation or whatever. Doesn’t change that it’s just flailin’. Only the strong get to be invincible all the time, right? So…”

Reid stopped there, his lips twisting as he swung his chopsticks.

The next instant, there was a shrill noise, and the white flash closing in on the side of his face was deflected by the chopsticks.

“Usin’ your enemies ain’t a bad idea. But it was too slow.”

Glancing toward the source of the flash he deflected, Reid snorted. At the other end of the passage, the multiple red eyes floating in the gloom were proof of the menace that they had driven back once before.

Subaru had thought to use the light that tripped his sixth sense as at least a possibility of recovery from this hopeless spot, but…

“Tch, an annoying one’s just arrived.”

“Guh!”

Reid kicked Subaru away out of the attack’s path. The next instant, a downpour of white lights rained down, turning the area where Subaru had been moments earlier into a charred field.

Reid batted aside those arrows and took aim at the unwelcome intruder—

“S-Subaru…”

Subaru landed, just touching Beatrice. As Beatrice regained her consciousness, her face was pale as she said his name. Watching her go through this tugged at his heart. He wanted to do something, anything to help relieve the fear and unease on her strained face.

“It’s not over…Beatrice…we’ll find a way to recover somehow…”

“No…not that! It’s coming!”

“What?”

He assumed she meant the big scorpion. But in the sense of menace at least, Reid and the giant scorpion were matched. *What else could come in this terrible situation…?*

“—You don’t…”

“Like I said, an annoying one’s just arrived.”

As the thought flashed through Subaru’s mind, Reid confirmed it.

His tone was serious, almost as if he felt the situation would be difficult to digest.

—The next instant, the Pleaides Watchtower jolted upward.

The massive shock knocked Subaru off the ground as the world spun around him.

“_____”

Subaru was helplessly rolled away as the residents of this fantasy world all demonstrated stunning reactions.

In midair, Emilia gave up trying to put any weight on her broken legs and used her magic from a painful position to defend Subaru from the concentrated barrage of light aimed directly at him. Julius dashed across the tilting world, answering Reid’s challenge with a thrust that contained everything he could muster. And Beatrice immediately pointed her small palms toward Subaru to cast a spell.

“—Murak!”

The instant she said that, Subaru was enveloped by a weightlessness that was obviously different from the sensation of being caught in a shock wave. It felt like he’d been freed from the shackles of gravity and let loose into a weightless world.

The world being flipped upside down didn’t have much effect on the situation. They all still did whatever they thought was best.

“Ah.”

And they were swallowed whole by the massive wave of black shadows that laughed at their efforts.

“_____”

The deafening sound of an implosion rang out. The watchtower —made of a material that boasted more strength than any simple stone—was being ground to dust. This was an atrocity committed by a shadow that shouldn’t have had any mass.

It wasn’t a simple harbinger of destruction but a natural disaster that swallowed up even those who possessed superhuman strength in this world.

Even Emilia, who had struggled against the scorpion, praying that she might protect her comrades.

Even Julius, who had answered Subaru’s request with his sword.

Even Beatrice, who had used her magic to protect Subaru before herself.

They were all entwined by the outstretched shadow in the blink of an eye, disappearing into the darkness.

“_____”

There was no sound, no reverberation as their figures were

erased.

Subaru couldn't find the words in his mind to describe what had happened to them in the span of a split second.

But there was one thing he could say for sure.

"—I failed."

"—I love you."

The murky words of love were uttered at the same time he accepted reality.

Like a whisper in his ear, like a murderous touch, like a full-body embrace, like a caress on his soul…that world-altering love felt terrifyingly close.

He understood immediately. This was the greatest of the five obstacles—the all-consuming shadow. It wasn't even clear whether there was a way to deal with it.

It was his third time seeing this shadow, and every time he had, he had lost his life.

And this isn't any different. The moment it appears and reaches me

—

"—The hell are you daydreamin' about, huh?"

All of a sudden, the black shadow swirling around Subaru was swept away by a single rush of movement.

"—No way."

"Peel your eyes and look. The hell you mean 'no way'? Are your damn eyes still workin'? Open 'em and take a good look," Reid roared. "You think I'm lyin'?"

Swinging the knight's sword carelessly, he cut back the shadow. He was holding the blade that should have been in Julius's hand.

Ironically, having lost its owner, it was being swung freely in the hand of the Sword Saint. But there was no time to feel anything about that fateful irony.

"_____"

The effect of Beatrice's magic persisted, and Subaru's body was still untouched by the influence of gravity. He watched as the floor and walls and ceiling disappeared and the tower lost all form.

—He saw Ram, who still had not been swallowed by the shadow.

"—!"

Twisting his body, kicking against a fragment of ground, he desperately flew to her slender body. His fingertips just managed to reach her, and he frantically pulled her into his arms.

The structure of the watchtower was already actively collapsing, and he had lost track of what was ceiling and what was wall. There was nothing but an unending black sky and an unending black floor: a black world.

The only thing that felt real in that world that had lost all meaning was the warmth in his arms.

"Argh."

The warmth from Ram's unconscious body.

"—!"

Gnashing his teeth, he bit his lip to anchor himself.

Just now, as the darkness threatened to blot everything out, I gave up, not even trying to understand the situation. I was just waiting for the end.

It was unforgivable. Not when this life in his arms was even now struggling to survive.

"Not yet, there's still…"

Something. Something could be gained from this situation.

Subaru had been swallowed up by the shadow's evil influence and had lost his life twice before. But both endings had been sudden. He had never been given any time like this before.

This time was different because of Ram, whose frail life carried on, and—

"Ha!"

—and because of the help he got from Reid, who wore a savage grin as he floated in the darkness, just like Subaru.

Of course, he wasn't going to thank him. Subaru's whole body was groaning from Reid's rough touch. And the main reason he had run out of time before the shadow swallowed up the tower was because Reid had inserted himself into this whole mess.

"You're gonna go down, too. One of us is going to make it happen."

"At least say it's gonna be you to the end, small fry."

Glancing down, Subaru saw Reid holding the sword in a backhand grip and taking aim at him. There was some distance between them, but a few yards was nothing to Reid.

As Reid focused his hostility on Subaru, the pitch-black shadow beneath him started to act more aggressively. But even that

renewed assault was no match for Reid's blade.

Subaru didn't realize it, but in that moment, he was essentially watching a reenactment of the legendary showdown between the Witch and the Sword Saint that was said to have happened four hundred years ago.

Regardless, death was coming for Subaru.

"At least…"

…Let her survive, even just one second longer.

With that plea, Subaru held Ram's body tightly in his arms.

The next instant, there was a torrent of light greater than any flashing blade that swallowed Subaru—

6

Transmigration: when things are lost, when things are redone, when things are sought.

Repeated, over and over, a collage of final moments that each should have been the last.

"_____"

A thought occurred to him.

Having someone by his side in that final instant was a blessed thing.

Not having to face the end alone with his outstretched finger, feeling someone close to his wavering soul…that gave him the strength to stand up again.

"_____"

But at the same time, he had another thought.

Why could Subaru Natsuki never reach it?

Why could Subaru Natsuki never save the person who was so painfully close in that final instant?

"_____"

Sand in the air rose high up into the sky, where it should not have been able to reach.

On the ground hundreds of feet below the balcony of the Pleiades Watchtower, a swarm of demon beasts were charging furiously, as if trying to topple the tower.

Meili was putting up a magnificent fight holding back the stampede using her ability to control demon beasts. As for the crises occurring inside, Julius was heading to Reid on the second floor.

And Subaru needed to race as soon as possible to save Emilia, who had run into Batenkaitos, but…

"—Master? You all right?"

As she called out to Subaru from behind, her long, black braided hair swayed as she cocked her head.

Despite fighting hard just moments ago, Shaula demonstrated a bottomless well of stamina and stood there calmly, stopping at once when Subaru called to her. There was no sign of unease or impatience on her face, no trace of any crafty, deceptive gleam in her eyes.

It was unclear whether that was a skillful act or her genuine reaction.

"Are you listening, Master? It seems like the others are wrapped up in something annoying, but…is there something I can do for you, Master?"

"Yeah, about that… Something you can do for me, huh?"

"Yessir. If you asked, then I would even fly through hell or high water, or even through the Great Waterfalls."

Cheerful and totally devoid of malice. Shaula held out both of her hands as she boasted. Studying her carefree smile, Subaru caught his breath just a little bit.

He had come back. Every time, he came back to this moment.

What he needed to do didn't change. Not the people he needed to save, not the enemies he needed to defeat.

So in order to confirm what more he needed to do, so that he wouldn't waver, he performed a necessary ritual.

"Shaula, would you do anything I asked?"

"Of course! I'll do anything you want, Master! As long as you're the one who's asking, I might even agree to something a little extreme. Ah, ah, ah, Master, are you maybe reaching your limit after seeing my sexy body? Is that why you pulled me away from everyone else?" Shaula's face turned red, and she squeezed her cheeks and squirmed. "Mrgh, you, you, you! Master, you—"

"—Shaula."

But Subaru paid no attention to her routine, looking her straight in the eye.

"If I told you to kill yourself, would you do it?"

CHAPTER 6

A SINGLE-MINDED STAR

1

—As the tower collapsed, as Reid's flash washed over him, Subaru Natsuki's life burned out.

His final moments completely evaporated.

There were a lot of questions Subaru had, like how had he kept his foothold in the crumbling tower, or how had he resisted that all-consuming shadow, or what did he intend to do next, but he set all that aside.

The one sure thing was that as Reid's final flash consumed Subaru, he evaporated.

Most likely, he didn't even have time to feel any pain, if he had to guess.

Of course, he wasn't about to convince himself that was an act of mercy on Reid's part, but not experiencing any pain or fear in his final moments was a rare experience for Subaru, who had died multiple times in such a short period.

There had not been any pain or fear—there was only rage.

"I…"

How many times was he going to keep dying pointlessly?

Being able to bring something back, finding a hint for breaking out…so long as there was something like that, Subaru's death wasn't meaningless. His suffering wasn't in vain.

What a terrible lie.

It was just an excuse because he wanted to avoid confronting his own powerlessness. He just didn't want to believe he had died pointlessly, without any hope or recourse.

And so he sought meaning in his death, to convince himself he

had not simply died for no reason at all.

If only I wasn't weak.
If only I was smarter.
If only it were someone else, someone stronger, wiser, braver.

"But…"

There was no one, save weak, stupid, pathetic Subaru Natsuki.

Because they always refused to leave Subaru alone.

Because they were the source of his battered and bloody resolve.

"That's why I…"

That's why Subaru Natsuki—

2

"If I told you to kill yourself, would you do it?"

It wasn't as if Subaru didn't feel some hesitance in asking the question.

He couldn't imagine what reaction she might have. Well, that wasn't exactly right, since he had imagined it. Multiple times. He had pictured several different patterns that he thought were possible.

So why was he uncertain?

"—? If you told me to kill myself, I would do it."

His chest ached at seeing Shaula point at her own cheek and answer so nonchalantly. It was a cry from somewhere deep in his breast, like something was stabbing him, as if something was breaking.

"_____"

Clutching his chest as he imagined that wound, Subaru exhaled deeply. He felt pathetic for complaining, when he had done this to himself.

Shaula's eyes widened in marvel as she watched him. There was no malice in them at all. She answered like she had been asked what was on the menu for dinner.

Her reaction was the second worst of the possibilities Subaru had imagined. She was willing to give up her life, no questions asked.

It was clear to see from her straightforward, unwavering eyes that it wasn't a lie or a joke. She had meant every word.

If he had at least seen some trace of self-interest or deception, it might have been less painful for his heart. But reality gave him no way out. Whether that was a mercy or not, he couldn't say at this point, but…

"…I see…"

"Do you want me to die, Master? Umm, if you're asking, then I'll do what you want. I'm ready anytime, but this is kind of a strange time to take the leap, no? Things are popping off inside the tower right now…"

"I know, I know."

Shaula still had her finger on her cheek as she cocked her head at Subaru's hoarse response. As her head moved, her long braided hair—her scorpion tail—swayed.

Scorpion tail… As Subaru thought of it now, it was an oddly apt name choice.

Just like Shaula in Scorpio, her name revealed her identity. And it wasn't just her name, either. There had been other signs.

She never had any intention of hiding it.

"Shaula, you wouldn't happen to be able to transform into a giant scorpion, would you?"

Subaru went right for the jugular, without beating around the bush.

One of the five obstacles they had to overcome in the Pleiades Watchtower—the giant black scorpion. Subaru was confident that was Shaula.

However, that was just something he had deduced based on the as-of-yet-unconfirmed power of his authority, that sixth sense he had suddenly developed. The fastest way to connect that intuitive answer to something more concrete was to simply ask her.

Of course, if he had more time, he could have chosen a different method, and if he couldn't trust her answer, he should have tried to find one.

But Shaula just kept her head cocked.

"Transform isn't exactly how I'd describe it, but yeah, I can. Ah, but it's hyper not pretty, so I don't really like it much. I like this shape that Mom and you designed for me best."

It was a question entirely out of left field, but Shaula again answered without hesitation.

“_____”

She had no intention of hiding anything.

All the more reason why he didn’t have to doubt her words. That scorpion inside the tower was actually Shaula, and she was their…

“…Enemy…”

“Master? You okay? You don’t look so hot? Want to rest your head on my lap? Or in my arms? Or on my chest? Get a little recharge?”

“…Don’t say pointless stuff like that. You said it yourself, we don’t have the time for that right now.”

“It’s true things are popping off in the tower, but you’re priority one, as far as I’m concerned, Master. Everything, eeeeeverything else can come second, or third even. So if you want to take advantage of the confusion to share a sweet embrace with me, I’m all for it. Burning for it, even.”

“No burning. Put that crap out.”

“Meanie.”

Pouting, Shaula sulked a little.

Bantering with her like that, with that utterly normal expression on her face, it almost felt like they had found a moment of calm.

“_____”

However, reality wasn’t so kind, and it was a far cry from peaceful.

Even as they were taking their time chatting, Emilia and Ram were busily holding back Gluttony while Beatrice provided them with support.

Julius was clashing with Reid/Roy, and Echidna had met up with Patlash and Rem, to guide them to safety in Taygeta.

And Meili was using her tamed demon beasts down below to hold off the stampede. The best possible hand was being played against all the five major obstacles at the moment.

However, even that was nothing more than an excuse so Subaru could talk with Shaula.

Because in this loop, Subaru Natsuki was—

“M-Master? Seriously, is something up? If you keep looking at me so boldly, I don’t know that I can hold myself back after four hundred years of waiting…”

Shaula held her body as Subaru stared at her. She was

pretending to act like normal, but she was not. In fact, she seemed to be feeling uneasy about Subaru's attitude. It was unlike her.

No, that's not it. This is probably her real motive.

She didn't hesitate at all when Subaru mentioned ordering her to kill herself, but she always got flustered the moment he showed any signs of abnormality. Almost like an innocent baby bird yearning for her parent.

"_____"

When he asked his first question, he had envisioned several possibilities.

The worst of them all was revealing her true self the moment he asked that cruel question and killing him on the spot. That would have meant all her behavior thus far had been a performance and everything they thought they knew about her had been a lie. That was the worst possible scenario he could imagine.

—It wasn't out of the question.

Once she confessed that she was the giant scorpion, he knew she had killed Beatrice and Echidna once before. And it was likely that she, as the scorpion, was the prime suspect in the loop where he had returned to the tower to find everyone dead.

That was what made Subaru's first question a gamble.

It wouldn't have been strange if she shot him in the head the moment she heard his question. That gamble…he could call it a win now.

But that wasn't the last roll of the dice.

The negative feelings Subaru had subconsciously built up, the chips that Gluttony and the Pleiades Watchtower had taken from him. Stringing together small wins wouldn't be enough to make up for those losses.

He would have to bet big.

"Shaula, sorry for asking so many questions, but there's something I want to know. From what I've heard, there are a bunch of rules to the examination in this tower?"

"You ask that right when I'm turning bright red?! …Well yeah, there are. I talked about it before you hit your head on the toilet, too, but…"

"Let me hear them now."

Poking her fingers together in front of her chest, Shaula didn't hide her sullen disappointment. But when he asked again, she held up her finger.

“One, it is forbidden to leave before the examinations have been completed. Two, it is forbidden to break the rules of the examinations. Three, it is forbidden to show disrespect to the library. Four, it is forbidden to attempt to destroy the tower itself…”

She counted down her fingers as she went through the explanations with practiced ease.

Of course, when it came to banter, she was a pro, so there was nothing strange about her explaining it all so unfalteringly. But there was something that felt off.

Part of it was her unusually serious tone, but the other part was that as she was counting down her fingers—she had started to touch her fifth finger, but she hadn’t mentioned an additional rule.

“And the fifth?”

“…There isn’t one. Weren’t you listening, Master? I only said four. Are you bad with numbers, Master? That’s no good. I’m not great with them, but I can at least count that much…”

“Shaula.”

“_____”

Subaru took an audible step forward, closing the distance with Shaula.

They had already been rather close, but now they were close enough that they were almost touching. This was another gamble on Subaru’s part.

Of course, the difference in their strength couldn’t be made up by simply moving one step closer, but…

“Master…are you playing with my heart? If you’re getting close to me and not the other way around… If you want to make me to talk, then you know, maybe keep it up and give me a hug…”

“If that would really make you answer, I will. I’d even call it a perk… But if my unreliable instinct is right, I don’t think that’ll do it.”

“_____”

“Shaula, I’m asking again. What is the tower’s fifth rule?”

Accepting Shaula’s mild rejection, Subaru asked again.

It wasn’t a matter of physical distance; he had to step into her heart. Whether the result was a present or something more painful, he had to ask the question.

Seeing Subaru steel his resolve and clench his fists, Shaula inhaled slightly.

“—Nuh-uh.”

“…Nuh-uh?”

She shook her head and crossed her arms in an *X* in front of her ample bosom.

The gesture was childish, but her eyes were dead serious.

“_____”

Staring into Subaru’s eyes as he stood in a dangerous place, her eyes were filled with extreme emotion. She was silent but suddenly seemed so frail and fragile. Her gaze was almost a supplication.

She shook her head again, like a child.

“Don’t wanna. No. I won’t say it. The fifth rule? Who cares about that? It has nothing to do with our honeymoon…”

“There’s no way it has nothing to do with this. Me and everyone else here are taking this tower’s exam. We can’t just assume we’ll be fine without knowing all the exam’s rules. So Shaula—”

“I don’t wanna.”

“Shaula!”

She covered her ears and looked away, like a child who refused to listen. Subaru stepped closer. He grabbed her shoulder to reveal the secret she was trying to keep hidden.

“You should have your own role in this tower. You’re the tower’s star guardian, right? You’ve been keeping watch all this time, haven’t you? Four hundred years, if that’s really true! So—”

“Four days.”

“…Huh?”

It was a whisper that cut Subaru short.

A time span so short, it couldn’t begin to compare with the centuries he had mentioned. But it wasn’t that her earlier explanation was a lie.

“Four days…? What are you talking about? You’ve definitely been here longer than that and—”

“It’s only been four days. You’ve only been here for four days.”

“—Ah.”

A hoarse rasp left his throat when he heard Shaula’s weak voice.

The loneliness she was feeling was something he had not imagined—had not even tried to consider.

And more than anything, the fact that he had not even imagined that might cause her to—

“It’s four days.”

The entreaty in her eyes was still there as her lips trembled again.

“It’s only been four days since you came to this tower. And of that, you were asleep for the first two days, so it’s only been two days that I could see you, talk to you, be at your side…even though I waited four hundred years! Just two days…”

“Shaula…”

“I thought a moment, even just a glimpse, would be enough.”

Shaula looked down, but she quickly stopped. It was like she didn’t want to waste even a single moment with him out of her sight.

—No, thinking back, it had always been like that.

As best he could remember, whenever she was in the same place as he was, she was always looking at him. Not because she was observing his every move, but because…

“I waited for you in the tower all this time, Master. Four hundred years. I thought I would be satisfied if I could just see you once. But that was a lie.”

“_____”

“You’re my everything, Master. All of you, all of my feelings for you—that’s all of me. Even if I had four hundred years, it wouldn’t be enough to tell you everything. But to only have two days…I don’t want that.”

“…That’s why you won’t tell me the fifth rule?”

Emotion coursed through Shaula’s whole body, making her who she was.

Four hundred years—he had just thought of it as a number, but now, it felt like he finally understood a little of the weight of what that number truly meant.

Her attitude had seemed so frivolous next to the heavy weight of four hundred years.

He had convinced himself that maybe she just didn’t have the ability to feel pain or bitterness or sadness. He had thought maybe she was just as cold and inhuman as that scorpion, at heart.

“I don’t want to talk about the rule. Nuh-uh. ’Cause if I do…”

“_____”

“If I do, you’ll realize how to clear the exam. So if I say it… If I say it, my time with you will be over.”

Shaula hugged herself as she bared her heart for Subaru. Her

voice, holding back sobs, tore at Subaru's heart.

This was an answer he had not anticipated.

Just like with the first question, he had imagined several responses Shaula might give him.

The real reason she was hiding the rules that governed the Pleiades Watchtower. If she was an accomplice of whatever nasty asshole designed this tower's rules, then he figured she would have some ulterior motive. Or maybe it was nothing so sinister, and she had simply not mentioned it on a whim, or because she had forgotten, and it didn't have any deeper meaning.

But the truth was neither.

Shaula had an ulterior motive for not telling them the tower's rules. But her motive had nothing to do with the plans of the Sage or whoever created this place. It was a much more earnest wish than that.

—She longed to reunite with the person she had been waiting for in absolute solitude for the past four hundred years.

That wish had been fulfilled at long last, and she was happy. All she wanted was for that time to last just a little longer.

She had held back for the sake of that humble wish.

"Master, do you hate me for lying?"

"_____"

"Do you hate me…and not want to see my face?"

Why did she look so much more heartbroken now than when he'd asked if she would die for him?

Why was she acting like whether Subaru hated her or not was more important than her own life?

—Why, after waiting four hundred years, did she think that was her goal?

"I…don't hate you."

"_____"

"Because you kept quiet, I…probably suffered some crazy draining stuff, and honestly, if you hadn't, I don't think we would have our backs up against the wall like this."

Subaru answered honestly as Shaula listened in silence.

He didn't feed her any lies. Only the truth. Because she had hidden that information, he hadn't been able to investigate properly and had failed to reach an answer. As a result, he had suffered several miserable deaths.

And not just him. Emilia and Beatrice and everyone else, too.

He couldn't forget the despair, the disappointment, the powerlessness he felt in those moments.

He was sure that if those moments had been caused by some evil mastermind, then he wouldn't have been able to forgive them.

Could he feel the same way about Shaula?

"—No."

He couldn't hate Shaula.

Shaula, who had spent four hundred years in solitude, and at the end of that long watch simply wanted to enjoy a mere two days feeling like she had fulfilled her meaning in life. Subaru couldn't bring himself to think of her as some evil mastermind.

If there was some evil at the root of all this, it was the unreasonable world itself, and the master who gave her the order four hundred years ago, who created this situation—

"—Ah"

Suddenly, a soft gasp escaped from Shaula's lips.

"Shaula?"

"Ah, ah… Ahhhh…"

She didn't respond. She just covered her face with her hands.

It was a pained, trembling voice that sounded totally unlike her.

"No…no…Master! Master, Master, MasterMasterMasterMaster…!"

"Shaula?! What is it, Shaula?! Why are—?"

Subaru reached out to shake her pale, trembling shoulders, but she grabbed his arms instead. Clenching his wrists painfully tight—

"—Someone broke the rules."

Staring into her eyes, Subaru gulped.

"_____"

—There was a strange change in her large eyes.

Her pupils had split into three and started pulsing with a red gleam. It happened to both eyes at once, giving her six pupils.

—Three on the left, and three on the right. Six eyes.

"Master…! There's still time…"

"Still time?"

"If you order me now, I can… I can kill myself."

Her eyes were pulsing red, and white steam started to rise from her body. Her pale skin was gradually getting redder, and he could feel an abnormal body heat from where she held his wrists.

The cause was unclear. But her body was heating up and changing. This was probably the initial stage of her transformation

into the giant scorpion.

"It's too late if I change. I'll become a heartless killing machine and kill you, Master. I want you so much, Master…I want you so much, I can't bear it…so…before that happens…please tell me to kill myself… If you do, I won't…"

…*Have to kill you.*

That was what she couldn't bring herself to say.

But instead of words, her eyes, her trembling voice, her very soul said it all for her.

"_____"

An incomparable dread welled up from inside Subaru. It was his human instinct in the face of a terror that seemed worlds apart from reality.

The human Subaru Natsuki was scared of the monster in front of his eyes, Shaula.

And so Subaru—

"Shaula, tell me the fifth rule."

"This isn't the time…"

"If you tell me, then…!"

Subaru shouted, interrupting her. Her shoulders trembled, and he grabbed them. They were hot. Hot enough that he thought they might burn his hands. Her body felt like it was on fire.

Don't let go. Don't let go of what's burning her body and mind.

"If you tell me, then I'll give the order. Don't worry. I'll give the order before you become a monster."

"_____"

Shaula's eyes widened as Subaru looked her right in the eye.

"Master…toying with women's hearts."

"I don't remember doing that…"

"Then you're toying with my heart. A lady-killer, just for me…"

Smiling faintly, Shaula gently put her hand over Subaru's as he held her shoulder.

"—Five, the destruction of examinations is not forbidden."

"_____"

"See, your eyes changed. To my beloved Master's eyes."

Shaula pushed Subaru's chest. He moved back, unable to hold on to her shoulders after the unexpectedly forceful shove. Coughing slightly, he looked forward and saw Shaula holding her body, crouching down—

"Ah, ahhh…ahhhh, ahhhhh…!"

Red steam rose from her body. The steam changing color was a sign of danger. The pupils of her eyes disappeared, having changed into pure red eyes at some point.

“Mas…ter…hurry. Before I…lose myself…”

“_____”

“Say it. Tell me to die! If you say it, I…”

With the same mouth that had pleaded so earnestly to keep them from finishing the examination, from leaving the tower, she was asking him to give the order that would end her life, giving her a way to avoid killing them—to avoid killing her beloved master.

Hearing her desperation, Subaru sighed.

“Shaula…sorry, that was a lie.”

“Eh?”

Her eyes widened. Seeing her reaction, Subaru held his breath and took a big leap backward.

Her pushing him back had been a blessing in disguise. If she had held on to his wrists, he would never have been able to do this.

—Subaru’s body passed over the balcony’s railing and out into the open air.

“Ma—”

Shaula’s shout was drowned out by the wind now whipping around him. And with that, he was on a nonstop express to the ground several hundred feet below.

He had not prepared anything to save himself. It was simple suicide. He had absolutely not wanted to do something like this, and he didn’t want to admit it, but he had intended this from the start.

He had intended to do this on this loop if it was an option.

Because now he could trust his own decisions without hesitation.

Because—

“Master!!!”

Shaula had leaped over the balcony just like him and was hurtling after him.

Her eyes were wide, and she was stretching her hand out, desperately chasing after Subaru. Not to kill him, but to save him.

—The giant scorpion was Shaula.

—Shaula had intentionally hidden one of the tower’s rules.

—Shaula had killed Subaru and his comrades multiple times and barred the way forward as one of the five obstacles.

But—

“Now I know I can save you.”

He wouldn’t forget her plea for him to order her to kill herself, so that she wouldn’t transform against her will, so that she wouldn’t have to kill him.

It was selfish, but he wanted to confirm that.

Who to save, who not to save, who to defeat, who to protect, who to love.

Without confirming that, he didn’t think Subaru Natsuki could advance any further. He didn’t have to be unsure of who he could love anymore.

“—Masterrrrrr!!!”

Shaula’s form shifted as she followed Subaru, hand outstretched.

Her arm swelled, transforming into a black pincer. There was no trace of her pale skin. It grew rougher and was covered in carapace, her flesh swelling from the inside.

In an instant, her body transformed painfully, as if her flesh was bursting at the seams. The sinister giant scorpion was complete. The scorpion’s tail quickly took aim at Subaru.

Most likely, the white beam launched from there would end Subaru’s life in an instant. He had no way to dodge in midair.

“Shaula would cry, so I’m not letting you kill me.”

Their fall would end before it could loose a shot.

Subaru and the scorpion were plummeting toward the ground, where the demon beasts were swarming. Subaru wouldn’t see what came of it.

Subaru Natsuki couldn’t survive a drop from several hundred feet up.

He would be dashed against the ground and die.

But just before he died, he had one last—

* * *

“I swear I’ll save you.”

It was a message the scorpion couldn’t comprehend and was carried away on the desert wind moments later.

<END>

AFTERWORD

The *Re:ZERO* Season 2 anime is on air now!

Hello! It's a merry-like-never-before greeting from Tappei Nagatsuki, the mouse-colored cat, right off the bat!

A lot has managed to delay the start of the broadcast, but it is currently safely on air! With the help of Director Watanabe and all the staff, we've worked all out on this adaptation! Just before I was writing this afterword, Subaru was experiencing the world's worst cause of death (rabbit)!

Anyhow, the current book in the sixth arc is no less stymied than the fourth arc currently airing in the anime. The feeling of a reversal in the works is growing, even as Subaru's memory loss and the chaos in the tower continue to mount.

Please look forward to the climax of the sixth arc and the resolution of Subaru's memories and his fate with his friends and enemies in the tower!

Like every time, the limits of the page width are quickly approaching, so on to the usual thanks!

Thank you, Editor I, for putting the pressure on by saying this was the most worrying volume yet. I struggled myself with how to bring it all together, but I believe it came out nicely. I'm grateful for your help!

To the illustrator Otsuka, I made several troublesome requests for the illustrations in the book! And for the cover, with Meili, too, when I nervously asked if I might ask you to add the worm to the background, it was a relief to hear that you wanted to draw it!

To the designer Kusano, thank you for your forceful design highlighting a light novel first pairing: a worm and a beautiful girl!

In manga news, both Atori's and Aikawa's adaptation of the fourth arc and Nozaki's *The Ballad of the Sword Devil* are both being published in *Gekkan Comic Alive*, and Minori Tsukahara's *The Frozen Bond* is running in Manga UP! They are all being drawn with a beauty and emotion that can't be expressed in writing alone! Please check them out as well!

To everyone else at MF Bunko J's editorial division, the proofreader, and all the bookstore staff, thank you very much for all of your work. I'll be in your care next time as well!

Also, the second part of the current anime is waiting just around the corner in January! Director Watase, the cast, and the staff, thank you all so much!

And finally, I am grateful for all the readers who continue to support this series.

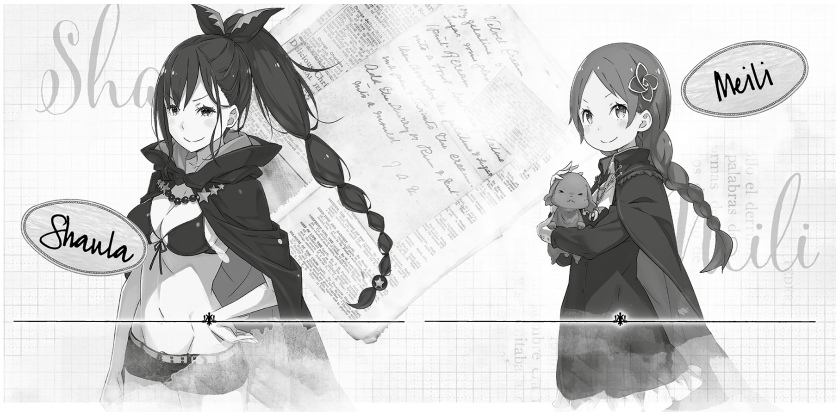
Light novels, anime, manga, and games, please enjoy the ever-growing world of *Re:ZERO*!

I look forward to meeting again in the next volume! Please continue to indulge in the story of *Re:ZERO*! Thank you!

September 2020

<<Let's get this frozen time moving again>>

CHARACTER DESIGN
SHAULA
Pincer
Legs
Tail
Shaula
Normal Eye
??? Eye
SCORPION
Laser Pointer
Hell's Snipe


Shaula
Meili

“Sooo, now it’s time to announce the next volume, but…why are you sobbing so much, half-naked lady?”

“Uuuuugh, it hurts. It hurts so bad! Before my very eyes! Maaaster!”

“Aah, sheesh, don’t cry. It’s true he’s an outrageous guy. He made me cry, too, so I understand the feeling.”

“Oooh, kiddo…you understand? Give it to me, kiddo! I’ll promote you from kiddo two to kiddo one!”

“Wait, you didn’t determine that just by counting? I’m surprised.”

“Still, though, Master is a terrible guy. Such a Shaulanizer! Not a womanizer, since that would make it sound like he was cozying up to other women! That Shaulanizer!”

“Sounds complicated. But don’t worry, because I punish him real good in season two of the anime that’s airing now.”

“Really? You really let him have it? You criminal, laying a hand on my master! I’ll protect Master! Hah! Hah!”

“Aaah, I stirred up a hornet’s nest. But I think you’ll have to wait for the second half, starting January 2021, for me to get punished. Too bad.”

“Gugyaaa! What a crafty little kiddo! But I won’t get discouraged! If the anime and light novels aren’t enough, I’ll do it in the smartphone game *Re:Zero Lost in Memories* that was released!”

“…You do know you aren’t in that game, either, right? That means you can’t do it.”

“Argh, I can’t hear you! Besides, the game lets you control Master and explore branching stories based on your choices! Meaning while I’m playing the game, I get to be Master… Master-Shaula unification! My nose is bleeding!”

“Bleh. Here, wipe it. Come on, clean yourself up… Haaah, I’m tired.”

“I’m in high spirits even when I’m tired and blood comes pouring out of my nose! And if you’re curious about my grief and the master who broke my heart, then Volume 25 is set to come out in December! The Pleiades Watchtower arc is reaching its climax!”

“Climax, huh? Will it really all get wrapped up in one volume?”

“It’ll happen! You can bet Master’s soul on it!”

“So cheap… But it wouldn’t be so bad to tie down his soul.”

“Mrgh! Kiddo! Wait, are you…?”

“Who knows? He has to show me a proper example, after all.

Y’know?”

“Mrghhhh!!!”

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink